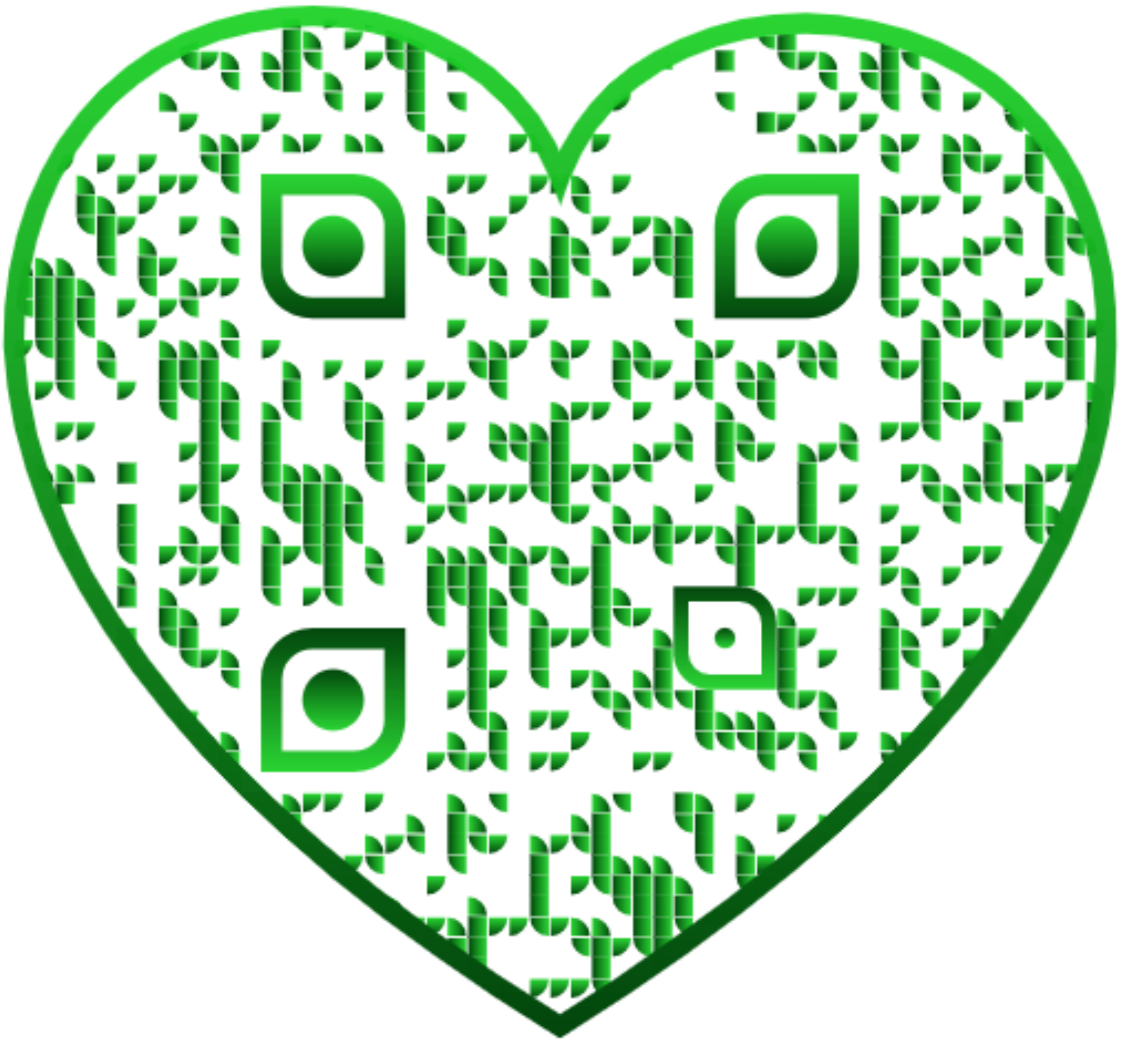
Rolling Stone
UK
OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2022
ISSUE 007

Harry Styles

How the new King of Pop set the music world aflame

Prequel mania:
House of the Dragon
The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power
Star Wars: Andor

+
Shygirl
Santigold
Matt Smith
Diane Morgan
Wunderhorse
Noah Cyrus
PJ Harvey
Jockstrap
Rema



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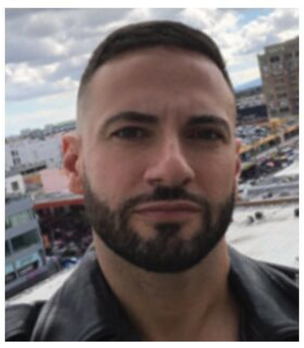
DEAN RYAN MCDAID

virgin atlantic

fly at your own altitude

Editor's Letter

Tune in to the sound of success



IT CAN SOMETIMES FEEL like we don't hear enough good news coming out of the UK. Between Brexit, Covid, the cost of living crisis, impending environmental collapse, and the Tories' inability to actually like the people they put in charge of their own party, it seems we don't often have much cause to celebrate.

As ever, the arts are here to save us. When the sh*t hits the fan and the deluge of news feels relentlessly grim, it's the arts that have reliably given us much-needed respite from the mundanity of the 9-5. And key to that success is the British music industry. Last month, the British Phonographic Industry (more commonly known by the snappier acronym, BPI) reported that annual music export figures for UK recorded music rose by 13.7 per cent in 2021 to a new high of £590.8 million.

This global success was propelled by the streaming of more British talent than ever, with almost 400 artists and bands accumulating more than 100 million global audio streams *each*. And that's not only down to superstars like Rolling Stone UK cover boy Harry Styles, Adele, Dua Lipa, Dave and Ed Sheeran, but new or breakthrough artists, such as Glass Animals, PinkPantheress and Rex Orange County. British music success is being celebrated across genres, from the likes of dance collective SAULT to rappers M1llionz and Yxng Bane, each of whom broke through 50 million global audio streams last year.

"British music success is being celebrated across genres, from dance collective SAULT to rappers M1llionz and Yxng Bane, each of whom broke through 50 million streams last year"

Meanwhile, industry forecasts predict worldwide recorded music trade revenues will double by 2030, from their 2021 level of US$25.9 billion.

The continual rise of British music's world-class output is also being driven from within the industry with record labels spending a colossal £494.8 million during 2021 in supporting artists' careers and development through A&R, marketing and promotion. This all works to underpin the UK as the world's greatest music exporter after the US, emboldening the BPI's ambition to see a doubling of annual music exports to £1 billion by 2030.

Yet, things could be so much better! As is often the story, the arts fall rather low on the government's list of priorities. Arduous red tape since Brexit has increased the challenges UK artists face when touring Europe, with the number of British bands booked to play European festivals down by 45 per cent, compared to 2017-2019.

As the UK music industry experiences a streaming boom, live performance – through which artists earn the majority of their income – is faced with very real obstacles that could quite easily be resolved. So, come on Whitehall, wake up and smell the mosh pit.

CLIFF JOANNOU
EDITOR IN CHIEF

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PHOTOGRAPHER

I love to make sure my sets are filled with the best vibes. I love playing music, having conversations with everyone on set, sometimes I might sing or dance a little. I think that it just relieves the tension and makes everyone feel as comfortable as possible. This day was no different. I was excited to photograph Rema; I've been a fan for a few years so it was fun to shoot someone who is of a similar age to me, who is hugely successful in what he does and someone I respect artistically. When coming up with the creative direction, I love to do research into the subject and base my choices on elements of their identity. Rema heavily uses the term 'Afro-rave' to describe his music and that was the exact rebelliousness, energy and culture I was trying to convey in these shots. He started off a little shy but quickly warmed up, and we got to speak a bit about my photography journey — he later said it was one of the best shoots he's ever been on, which was so nice to hear!

Paul Kirkley
WRITER

For me, picking a favourite Doctor Who is like selecting a favourite child. But if pushed, I'll go for Matt Smith — the actor who, above all others, most perfectly bottled the Time Lord's mix of alien enigma and English eccentric. He seemed genuinely touched when I told him this during our interview for this issue. What I *didn't* reveal was that I once dressed up as him for a newspaper feature on the theme of 'My TV Hero'...

The occasion for our chat was Smith's starring role in the *Game of Thrones* prequel, *House of the Dragon*. For this issue, I also spoke with Benjamin Walker and Robert Aramayo, stars of Amazon's new *Lord of the Rings* series, *The Rings of Power*. Who will win the battle of the megabucks fantasy epics? Again, don't make me pick a favourite.

Emma Garland
WRITER

The prospect of starting a family caught up with me at the start of the pandemic. Whether it was hitting my 30s or having more time to think, the size of my window to have kids looked like a cat flap in an elephant house. It felt like I had to make a decision and make it now. After talking it out with my partner, we realised we couldn't afford it even if we wanted to. Not now, or anytime soon. So, we said, "Fuck it", high-fived, and made a curry. What else can you do? Lately, there's been a lot of media focus on the dropping birth rate, but very little on the obvious economic reasons why. It was both comforting and sad to speak to people about their own hopes of starting a family, and how they're being affected by financial concerns above all else. Ultimately, things like the unregulated housing market and the sky-rocketing cost of living are warping not just the future of people in their 20s and 30s, but of the UK as a whole.

There's a feeling among millennials of being stalled in a perpetual state of trying to start our lives, while performing a graceless slide into middle-age. It's not surprising, then, that most of us hyper-focus on small joys; things within our grasp, for example, trekking to Milton Keynes for the long-awaited return of My Chemical Romance. It was nice to dig into that for this issue also.

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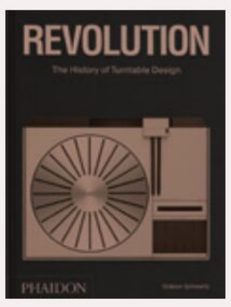

It’s a rap

Ben Sherman have collaborated with UK rap and grime artist Tinie for their autumn/winter 22 campaign. Launching on the Ben Sherman Global Artist Foundry, a platform created for the brand to engage and partner with both breakthrough and well-established musicians, artists and creatives, Tinie wears a cool winter wardrobe from the Signature and B by Ben Sherman collections. The brand have become a staple of British culture since their launch in the 60s, and south Londoner Tinie, with his proud Nigerian heritage, is a perfect fit to show off what Ben Sherman’s new season has to offer, especially as the musician has stellar fashion credentials himself, being a respected designer in his own right.

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Designs for life

Montblanc Mark Maker and actor Cillian Murphy stars in the brand's latest On the Move campaign, which focuses on the importance of always pursuing your passion. In it, the *Peaky Blinders* star sports the 1858 GMT Automatic watch and models the StarWalker BlackCosmos writing instrument (both pictured), as well as the Montblanc Extreme 3.0 backpack. Crafted from embossed leather, it's perfect for adventurers on the go. As Murphy says: "This campaign ultimately reveals that if you do what moves you and really means something to you, then you are likely travelling in the right direction." Wherever life takes you, Montblanc ensures you'll be living it in style.

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Culture clash

In the thick of a decade-long recession and political upheaval, now is the ideal time for The Horror Show! A Twisted Tale of Modern Britain, an exhibition tracing the past 50 years of British counter-culture. Presenting an alternative view of the UK through art, music and film, it is divided into three acts. The first, Monster, explores the turbulence of the 70s and social division in the 80s, while the second, Ghost, traces the hedonism of the 90s and the shock of 2008's global financial crisis, from which we've never recovered. Finally, in Witch, we see a new generation pushing for hyper-connectedness and inclusivity. Catch the thrilling ride at Somerset House from 27 October until 19 February 2023.

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Ray Stevenson, The Bromley Contingent , 1978

Be a rebel

THOMAS SABO's Rebel at heart collection continues its connection to nature with new jewellery inspired by the most revered of reptiles. Snakes, glittering with black stones, slink their way onto earrings, rings and pendants, wrapping themselves around your fingers and earlobes, or twisted around a sword, hanging from a necklace chain — all with the THOMAS SABO signature of beautiful, intricate, highly detailed design.

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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

An antidote to shyness

British pop star Shygirl on her new song 'Coochie' being censored for radio, women's fear of their own genitalia and the influences of nature and short stories on her debut album, Nymph

THERE ARE FEMALE ARTISTS who perform with notable control of their voracious sexuality, and then there's Shygirl, who keeps hers on a tight, diamanté leash. Blane Muise is hungry for everything: sex, experiences, travel and fun. Unlike her assertive and X-rated EP *Alias*, *Nymph* seduces you by telling you a story. "This music takes its time a bit more and doesn't rush into the room but does make a space for itself," Muise says, calling from the hairdresser's chair in London, where she is pampering herself ahead of a trip to France for live shows. The 12 tracks of *Nymph* were created with her best friends including Arca, Mura Masa and Sega Bodega, along with producers like Noah Goldstein, Danny L Harle and BloodPop. Sonically, it balances dark and light moods, the twisted and the futuristic, and draws heavily from classic club tracks and wistful and expansive 00s pop. Forward-thinking co-creators aside, this record is Shygirl being softer, more vulnerable and commanding your attention as Britain's main experimental pop girl.

"I hate censoring anyway but certainly in this context when it interferes with the messaging of the song. I hope that 'Coochie' normalises the experience of hearing about vaginas"

Your music demands pleasure and satisfaction from sex, people and life. During the pandemic, everyone had a sex and experience drought; we're just so hungry for everything. Now we're out of the pandemic, do people come up to you and say, "I feel this hunger for experience and sex, too"?

So many people have come up to me and said, "You've changed my life." Obviously, that's a lot of Americans, who are very dramatic. With *Alias*, it was all very surface level; it wasn't that deep but it's a privilege to be able to be playful and carefree. And that was always something that I really needed to tell myself that I could be in that time, too. So, I can understand how you can access my music in that way and be liberated. But moving into this next phase with *Nymph* now, I want to be a bit deeper and vulnerable.

There aren't any female UK artists I know of who write music about sex and sexuality in the way you do, whereas America has got the likes of Megan Thee Stallion, Cardi B and others. Why do you think that is?

I think it's the nature of what drives British music. I'm so used to hearing Americans in general talk like that about sex and be more brash, I think it's a cultural thing. British people are a bit more prudish [in art] – my idea of what it means to be British is about what is appropriate and what outward-facing image you present of yourself. And I guess that's why I felt like I needed to push against that a bit and say I'm not any lesser just because I want to talk about my experiences and what I derive pleasure from. Why should that be something that's hidden or kept secret? It's such a big part of who I am as a person. The only thing I've noticed in some of the interviews I've done, is that I don't really see so much where people are asking the Megan Thee Stallions and the Cardi Bs their think pieces on it; they just take the music for what it is. Whereas in the stuff that I've done, it has been contextualised a lot more.

You write about sexual experiences with people of all genders on *Nymph*. If you're writing about sex with a man or a woman, do you find that you naturally approach them differently to make quite different songs?

I've probably written more about men – I've had more turbulent relationships with men than women. That has maybe put me in a space to figure it out, musically. But I think I probably approach it differently because I have approached those relationships differently. There's a lot more emotionally stunted men that I've had to pick up the slack for, and therefore regain composure in my songs, than I have with the women I've had relationships with. But I'm still figuring out my experience as someone who is attracted to more than one gender.

There have been so many instances in life where I've spoken about my experiences with women and other women have gone like, "Oh, I can't imagine being with a woman like that," repulsed by the thought of having sex with a woman. That may say something about how you feel about yourself and your body as a woman. Especially talking about the vagina – so many women can't even talk about it, but it's a part of your body! How good it would have been [when] I was younger to have songs like 'Coochie' that sounded nice and spoke about it nicely. It's definitely still a journey for me in how I'm able to articulate my experiences with women, because I've had so many unhealthy relationships with men that I haven't really wanted to always throw myself into that same space with women. And I'm probably more cautious in my relationships with women to not be the toxic individual.

ACTING OUT
As a pop star, Muise still feels like she's playing a part

I have also had so many of those same vaginaphobic conversations with straight women — it's like they think the vagina is monstrous, even the word itself.

I feel like coochie is such a soft, censoring word for the vagina anyway, and I still had to censor that further for the radio. I understand if it's vulgar, but on this occasion, it isn't at all. I would have preferred to see what the general public thought before censoring it, you know? I would have loved to have given them the opportunity to be outraged if they were, or to totally

DEEP DIVE
New album *Nymph* shows Shygirl's sensitive side

accept it. We need certain points to test that, because maybe people 20 years ago would have been offended, but not now, and if they are, they should be able to have free will. But maybe even in talking about it, things will change for someone else. It's only things that serve the male gaze that are fine – it's still hard to assert the space as a woman to talk about my desire.

What did the song get censored to?

It's cutie, or something lame. I hate censoring anyway but certainly in this context when it interferes with the messaging of the song. As an artist, I want this song to be fun to engage with but I'm aware that when you put things out, it does have an effect and it's not just a fun song. Sometimes it's a song that's necessary to exist. I hope that 'Coochie' normalises the experience of hearing about vaginas, basically.

***Nymph* feels darker and sexier in a different way. It's like jumping into a really dark pool of water or something. How did you see this album as a shift from the last one?**

I almost sidestepped part of my story in a lot of ways – the takeaway from *Alias* was that I'm a big, strong assertive woman and I forgot to tell you guys how I got to that space. *Nymph* tells us a bit more of that. It's through being vulnerable, putting myself in precarious positions emotionally that I got to those themes of strength. I think it's necessary for people to treat me nice to know that I'm a person. How can I expect an audience to be careful with me if I don't tell part of that story?

I love that the visualisers for 'Come For Me' and 'Firefly' both put nature centrestage. So does the 'Coochie' video, in a way.

I've always found great satisfaction from just being in nature or being somewhere where I feel significant. I had this idea that I wanted [the visuals] to be super futuristic, but the sounds are futuristic, so by the time it came to making videos, I wanted to root that in things that have existed forever and will exist beyond me.

The 'Firefly' video reminds me of those Nelly Furtado-type, 00s pop videos where female singers are in nature or have these big, expansive backgrounds.

Sometimes I enjoy dipping into a cliché because I haven't seen myself do it – someone who looks like me do it. I never thought I'd be making music or doing pop-star shit – it feels like I'm always cosplaying.

What books did you read during writing *Nymph* that might have fed into it?

I really wasn't reading that much, but I was thinking back to the things that I had read previously but hadn't really utilised. So, I was looking at romanticism and Thomas Hardy and this brutalist approach to romance and life and positioning things as nihilistic sometimes, or romanticising a dark experience. With romanticism, you present all these harsh landscapes and its relationship to man and the futility of existence, the beauty of it. That's what I'm trying to pick apart and put back together in this album. With 'Firefly' and 'Woah', there's this idea of experiences that haven't always felt good, but I find a good space at the end or accept that it's futile, and then build my own environment around that visually. This is a landscape of my own, this is a space that I've handpicked purely to satisfy myself, and to give myself pleasure.

HANNAH EWENS

***NYMPH* IS RELEASED ON 30 SEPTEMBER VIA BECAUSE MUSIC**

RS RECOMMENDS

STAY ON TRACK WITH OUR PICK OF THE LATEST ONES TO WATCH

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FlowerovLove

DYLAN

Cobrah

STONE

Matilda Mann

On recent single 'Hell', newcomer Matilda Mann pits minimalist instrumentation against soaring melodies to deliver a stark reminder that the threat of sexual violence is encountered by women across the globe every day.

"The subject of sexual assault is always something I've struggled to talk about, so I guess the main way I've been able to face it is through music. I hope releasing this song starts conversations. Conversations between friends/family/trusted ones. Helps people who have been coping by themselves. Making the subject less scary and open," she says in a statement about the thought-provoking track.

Dylan

Having supported Ed Sheeran on his recent UK stadium tour, indie pop star Dylan is on a mission to prove why she deserves to play similar-sized spaces as the main attraction.

Recent hit 'Girl of Your Dreams' addresses universal themes of "frustration towards someone who sadly had absolutely no interest in me". We've all been there.

The Heavy Heavy

Listen to The Heavy Heavy's recent single 'Miles and Miles' and you'll realise just how much their self-professed love of The Rolling Stones and The Mamas & the Papas shines through. Their output is proudly indebted to the West Coast of America and the 60s, without ever coming across as a cheap pastiche of those pioneering genres.

STONE

Having honed their craft in Liverpool's vast network of sweat-and-sawdust venues, recent Polydor signees STONE are the post-punks with a reputation for mosh-pit starting licks and the snarling delivery of frontman Fin Power.

"*You probably hate me / But what can I say? / I'm a hateable guy*," comes his unrepentant mantra on recent track 'Waste'.

Poppy Ajudha

On debut album *The Power in Us*, Poppy Ajudha displays kaleidoscopic work that takes in everything from arresting neo-soul vocals to industrial drumbeats. Its sonic ambition is only matched by the messages behind each track — with the Londoner tackling topics as diverse as overbearing parental expectations and the never-ending battle for female bodily autonomy.

Cobrah

Recent single 'Brand New Bitch' epitomises exactly what Cobrah is all about. The Stockholm-based musician creates tunes dredged from pop's deepest and darkest corners, with industrial club production accompanying affirming self-love lyrics. It's no wonder she's been touted as one of cyberpop's brightest and boldest new voices.

BRUTUS

With famous fans in Dave Grohl, Metallica's Lars Ulrich and Biffy Clyro's Simon Neil, Dutch rockers Brutus are attracting attention in all the right places. Their debut album *Unison Life* looks likely to reward expectations, with first track 'Liar' showcasing their furious sound.

Flowerovlove

On recent single 'Hannah Montana', 16-year-old Londoner Joyce Cisse shows off the woozy psych-pop that has won her deserved comparisons to Solange and Tame Impala.

"'Hannah Montana' is a reflection of how I'm a regular student on the weekdays but on the weekends I'm Flowerovlove," she says.

With big things expected, that divide is set to grow even further.

PVA

South-London band PVA's debut album *Blush* is a record of contrasts. Rave-primed singles such as 'Hero Man' sit beside more heartfelt songs that explore their private hopes and fears.

"It's quite an anxious record sometimes that is relating to mental health issues and carries within it the anxiety of making an album," said drummer Louis Satchell.

"It's been a rocky ride, but we always pick ourselves up."

Dolores Forever

"*I thought you saw me like a Rothko / But you didn't even see me at all*," comes the infectious chorus on Dolores Forever's 'Rothko'. It's the perfect demonstration of what the duo do best — irresistible indie pop peppered with brilliantly surreal lyrics and infectious hooks.

DYLAN: LILLIE EIGER; DOLORES FOREVER: FRANCESCA ALLEN; STONE: CHARLIE HARRIS; FLOWEROVLOVE: SANDRA EBERT

Expect the unexpected

As Jockstrap release their debut album, Rolling Stone UK chats to the pop duo who never stop moving

JOCKSTRAP HAVE a mantra within the band: always trust your first idea. "We nearly always go with it," says Georgia Ellery, specifically in relation to their music video for recent single 'Glasgow'. "We're the ones who know the music best," she adds of herself and bandmate Taylor Skye. "You can work with the best director in the world and it's still not going to be as good as that initial idea, because that comes from the same place [as the music]. It's made for each other."

The 'Glasgow' video, a coming-of-age story that sees the pair running through fields and diving into water, is dizzying, glorious and often head-scratching; three things that define the music and art Jockstrap make.

Ellery and Skye formed the group in 2018 after meeting when they were both students at London's Guildhall School of Music & Drama. Ellery, also a member of Black Country, New Road, has been playing violin since the age of five, while Skye – who studied electronic music – does his work mainly while hunched over a computer.

As part of their seemingly traditional musical education, they formed Jockstrap, a project in which Skye takes Ellery's often simple, sweeping songs and puts them through a future-pop blender, with hard-left turns at every juncture. Some of their music feels fit for concert halls, while other tracks belong in the heat of a messy rave. In another curveball – standard practice for the duo – they were originally signed to legendary electronic label Warp for a series of early EPs, but upcoming debut album *I Love You Jennifer B* will come out via indie stalwarts Rough Trade.

EDDIE WHELAN

The album has been created over the past three years, and a lot of its material was workshopped at some of the band's soon-to-be-infamous London parties. At cosy Hackney venue The Glove That Fits, the band have been throwing parties over the past year with local DJs and often performing PA sets themselves. As YouTube videos of the nights attest, they're delightfully freeform expressions of creativity and intense dance music.

"Going to clubs has been a big part of why we came to meet each other in the first place," Skye explains, revealing that the pair are making up for lost time with their raves, having been too young to go clubbing when they were first exposed to dance music. Through these parties, their abrasive live sets and a series of collaborations (Ellery worked on a lockdown project with Jamie xx for BBC Radio 3's *Late Junction*), dance music and culture is very much in Jockstrap's DNA.

The most striking thing about the duo, though, is how they constantly find ways to innovate and disrupt their creative process to keep things fresh. "I grew up listening to radio rips on YouTube of dance music, and it's really compressed and has a very distinctive sound," Skye remembers, revealing that for debut album track 'Greatest Hits', Jockstrap managed to get a demo version of the song played on Radio 1 under a fake name, before ripping it back off the airwaves to use for the album.

"When you do that, you can't really figure out where all the sounds are coming from when you listen back," he adds, putting his finger on just what makes Jockstrap's music so unknowable and magical. **WILL RICHARDS**

MUSIC

Reining supreme

After raging in his teens as Dear Pretties' frontman, Jacob Slater has found a calmer, more mature sound in his solo act, Wunderhorse

BY **ELLA KEMP**

JACOB SLATER is trying to be more hopeful about things. He's attempting to find more useful ways to redirect the anger that used to fuel his life, making peace with issues he might not have acknowledged when he was younger and finding beauty in the darkness of it all. He's also putting extra effort into enjoying London.

"When I'm busy, it's great!" Slater, 24 today, laughs from a pub in Bethnal Green on the hottest day of the year so far. You can tell he's trying awfully hard to mean it. "I left home when I was 17 and lived here for five years, and at that time when I wasn't busy, I think the industrial non-stop-ness ate me up a bit."

That period in Slater's life saw his boisterous arrival onto the music scene as the frontman of post-punk trio Dead Pretties, who imploded almost as quickly as they exploded to life in 2017. But Slater is taking pains to not speak too poorly of the band that got him started. This young man is hardened but wiser, as his debut album under new moniker Wunderhorse, the complex and poignant *Cub*, attests.

Wrestling with early relationships and precocious mistakes, the record shares DNA with Sam Fender's triumphant *Seventeen Going Under*, featuring bold songwriting that is unafraid to address the elephant in the room: the monsters of youth.

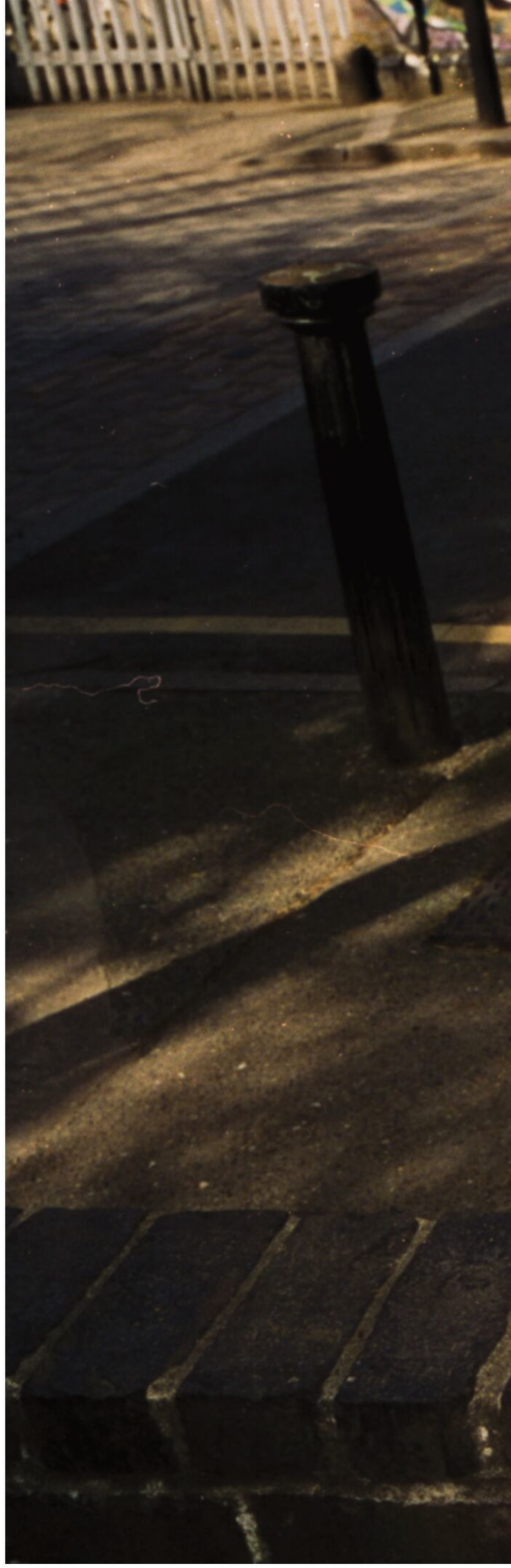
"It's about analysing things you missed at the time because you were so caught up in them," Slater says of *Cub*. In most of his songs, his lyrics focus on other people rather than himself — an older woman on stormy opener 'Butterflies'; a recent ex-girlfriend on soaring album standout 'Purple': "She had a pretty tough home life growing up, but I thought there was something worth celebrating. When you're with someone like that you want to hold a mirror up and make them happy."

Commenting on his storytelling methods, he says, "When you're writing about somebody else's life, it's important to find some good in the things people have suffered." Of his hope to find some light in the confusion and struggle he so often sings of, he states, "Nothing is ever fully good or bad." Did he learn this lesson in those rocky early days, and their themes of chaos and anger? "This album hopefully isn't angry for the sake of angry, which is what the music I made in my late teens was," the musician admits. "Hopefully, the anger is channelled in a more authentic and positive way and used a bit more sparingly."

The album embodies that same hope — but it's not just naive optimism that everything will work out in Slater's favour. To get these new songs ready for a life on the road — Slater will be joining Sam Fender and Fontaines DC, who both discovered his music authentically, for a string of shows later this year — the rehearsal process is much more "intricate" than Dead Pretties ever had the time or energy for, even though storming lead single 'Leader of the Pack' and the more brooding '17' were written during that first chapter of Slater's career. "It all requires more of a level head now," he says. "The old songs, most of them have three or four chords and you could bang them out and go crazy. I definitely can't get up to my old antics any more; the songs just won't work."

Those "antics" involved a lot of drinking and drugs as Slater moved from his teens into his early 20s. It's a lifestyle he's now happily swapped for a more peaceful existence by the sea in Newquay, whenever he can get back there. "It got to the point in my late teens where what was sparking the creative cogs in my head ended up just slowing me down," he confesses. But that existence must still, somehow, find a way to make thundering guitar music hold water. Where does the buzz come from now? "It's maybe more nerve-racking at first to be stone-cold sober, but if you let it take you over, it can actually help you because it's totally real," Slater says. "There are no synthesised emotions. I'm full of adrenaline and

"It's maybe more nerve-racking at first to be stone-cold sober, but if you let it take you over, it can help you because it's totally real"



WAESPI

I've got to go out there and deliver. I think once you get used to it, it's a massive help."

Slater isn't fully ignoring his first musical identity, having always held rock icons like Neil Young and Elliott Smith close to his heart and at the forefront of his mind as a writer. Smith's influence in particular is all over *Cub*, and there's a similar delicacy in Slater's vocals on 'The Girl Behind the Glass'. Elsewhere on the record, the mesmeric 'Mantis' nods to Pixies' 'Where Is My Mind?' in its powerful outro. These artists — the founding fathers of the kind of music Wunderhorse wants to be making — are so often compartmentalised as 'sad boys' in today's vernacular, but Slater sees it differently. "There's this misconception that listening to 'depressing' music when you're feeling that way is revelling in sadness, but actually I think it works in the same way as great poetry," he says. "It reaches out and lets you know you're not alone, like a light in the darkness rather than dragging you down to the depths. Some people get that wrong."

The everlasting ambition of Wunderhorse is to find that light in the darkness. To lift up your head beyond the industrial non-stop-ness and be able to see the horizon from your front door. "I'm looking forward to moving into the latter half of my 20s," Slater says of what will come after this first major achievement, and how he'll tentatively keep moving forward.

"I feel like I did a lot of quite painful learning in my late teens and through my early 20s. I think I see the world slightly differently now, and have more tools at my disposal to deal with things that in the past few years would have thrown me. They don't really bother me any more. Maybe that's just getting older." ®

INTERVIEW

Talk of the devil

Fresh from making fans swoon in the captivating BBC/HBO romcom* Starstruck, *as he heads up Steven Moffat's mind-bending Amazon thriller* The Devil's Hour, *Nikesh Patel doesn't underestimate the importance of becoming a South Asian leading man

BY **LEE DALLOWAY**

"THEATRE WAS my gateway drug," chuckles Nikesh Patel. Born in Wembley to pharmacist parents, once he was hooked on performing, there was no chance of him joining the family business. "I tried my best to be the 'good son', then my head got turned by acting. At school, I loved literature, exercising my imagination and getting lost in stories and plays. I had some special teachers who understood that plays were meant to be read out loud and inhabited."

After gaining recognition with a guest part on *Doctor Who*, he soon bagged a starring role in Mindy Kaling's diverse, small-screen remake of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. But it was his turn as the endearing Tom Kapoor in *Starstruck*, returning soon for a third season, that would see him garner mainstream attention and a level of fame that he's "very much comfortable with". Translation: he can command high-profile roles, yet still walk 10 paces down the street before somebody recognises who he is.

Erudite, charming and passionate about what he does, it's easy to see why Patel sells so well as the affable romantic lead. However, things take a darker turn in the upcoming *The Devil's Hour*, with Patel starring as a detective investigating a serial killer, played by the legendary Peter Capaldi, and how the events intertwine with a woman who wakes every night at exactly 3.33 am. True to form, Nikesh is playing one of the good guys, a role he loves.

"Don't get me wrong, I can be a bastard like anyone else," he laughs. "The received wisdom is heroes tend to have less juicy stuff, but that's not been my experience. My character very much goes against the grain of what you'd expect from a leading man. You get the sense he's not the most suited to his job; he doesn't have the stomach for it. That's interesting to latch on to as an actor. You want to find the complexities. Someone who's very nuanced, who the audience can root for."

Patel is relishing what he describes as a "boom time" in the amount of compelling content being made for television. "Cinema at the moment is dominated by these big blockbusters, which I love as much as the next person," he says. "But the plotting of *Devil's Hour* is so delicious, I'm looking forward to fan theories on Reddit and people trying to figure out what it all means. I felt that myself while making it."

Although he acknowledges that his brief as an actor is first and foremost to entertain, Patel also appreciates how groundbreaking it is to be a South Asian leading man. "I'm still of the view that representation is an ongoing mountain to climb," he notes. "If you're a person of colour, queer or disabled, or someone who identifies in some way as a minority, it should be a given that you have to be an advocate. But even when you want to push things forward, you have to stop and recognise the very act of walking through doors, where the generation before that had to hammer those doors down.

"Can I try and take things in a different direction, or learn from where they struggled or failed? That's where I have to push things even further for the next generation that will change the landscape. The younger generation coming up now is very different. Their capacity to call things out and question things is amazing."

His drive for advocacy and visibility could in part be due to personal experience of professional discrimination. "There have been situations where something's been said on set, thankfully a long time ago, where it was definitely someone

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Danny Kasirye**

> **I tried my best to be the 'good son', then my head got turned by acting**

THRILLER INSTINCT Patel in *The Devil's Hour* and (below) with Rose Matafeo in *Starstruck*

using inappropriate, offensive, racist language," recalls Patel. "I remember at the time kicking myself because I stayed quiet, and I should have said something. And then the moment passes. There are two things I take away from that: next time I'll be ready. But that also, it's something you can take forward and educate the younger generation about. I think that's a real source of strength."

The good news is that his more recent experiences have hinted at a definite sea change in both representation and the creative process of current productions. "What was nice in *Starstruck* was I was having a conversation with the writer, Rose Matafeo, and she asked if I had any questions about the script," Patel says of his breakthrough part. "The character wasn't called Tom Kapoor or written with an Asian guy in mind, and I said, 'Let's have a talk about changing the surname,' which she was completely open to. Ten years ago, would I have thought it was my place to suggest that? Maybe not."

Being able to actively contribute in this way empowered Patel to speak up. "The knock-on from that [was] with *The Devil's Hour*, the character wasn't called Ravi. It was written as a white character," he tells me. "Writers write what they know, but as soon as you come along the role becomes yours. My role as an actor is flipping through the script and thinking 'Is there anything in the dynamic that changes as a person of colour?' Sometimes nothing needs to be changed, sometimes it does. The show isn't about Ravi's ethnicity, but that process makes me excited about the way things are going now."

"If you're a minority, it's a given that you have to be an advocate"

As well as becoming bolder with regards to his place in the creative hegemony, Patel is also learning the value of seeking support from his peers. "One of the benefits of the pandemic, when a lot of us actors had to down tools, is I spent time chatting to Himesh Patel, Sacha Dhawan and Anjli Mohindra," he reflects. "Amazing actors, all smashing it. What was nice was getting together and swapping war stories. You learn that there's a community of people you can call up who will give advice, and that advice may come from a horror story that they've been through and how to handle it and not forgive certain behaviours."

Looking ahead, Patel is confident of a more inclusive future. "I feel more and more that it's a case of 'when' not 'if' we will all have the opportunity to work together on something, and that's truly progress." ®

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SCAN ME

Q&A

PJ Harvey

On her surreal new novel, loving Elvis, reconsidering her early work, and the irresistible allure of darkness

BY KORY GROW

IN *ORLAM*, the surrealistic new novel written in poetic verse by alt-rock firebrand PJ Harvey, a nine-year-old girl named Ira, who lives in Dorset, swoons over ghosts and encounters real-life villains, all as foretold by her village's oracle, Orlam. Harvey, who was once a nine-year-old Dorset girl herself, wrote the entire work in the region's dialect — rendering words like "grievance" as "engripement" and "hot" as "hetful" — which makes the whole story even stranger. (She also included a standard-English translation of the book.) It's the product of honing her writing for three years under the mentorship of Scottish poet Don Paterson. "Learning the craft of poetry writing seemed to be a very natural progression after having been a songwriter for a long time," she says. She's also been recording a new album, due out next summer: "It took a long time to write to get right, but at last I feel very happy with it," she adds.

Your last few projects have looked at the world at large. Why did you decide to localise this one?
With [my 2011 album] *Let England Shake,* I was so absorbed with reading war poets. Quite often poems of great beauty are describing something very violent or very ugly, and this was really intriguing to me. That was what began to get me interested in wanting to become a better poet. I've always followed my instinct as a writer, and my instinct was telling me I needed to change the scale to come back down to a small scale. One person, one village, one wood — somewhere to sort of gather my energies again.

Did you grow up speaking "Dorset"?
There were certain phrases that you'd hear. A phrase I remember that I used in the book was "Seeming I." *We* would say, "Well, it seems to me..." But instead of saying "It seems to me," they go, "Seeming I." And I remember things like "cram-it"; that's your lunch.

I appreciated the dirty words in the Dorset dialect, too, like "munter", which you wrote in a footnote meant "fugly".
Yeah [*laughs*]. I had a lot of fun writing this book. I really wanted it to be not only a book of a lot of dark and very sensitive and emotional things, but also of great humour. I used the language to my advantage in doing that.

What attracts you to writing about "dark things", as you put it?
It's just a natural inclination to look under the surface. I'd be the person that would want to pick up the stone and see what was underneath it — not look at the beautiful stone on the surface. I've always had that curiosity. I guess not everyone has that desire.

There's a lot of folklore in this book. Are you superstitious yourself?
I studied the folklore month by month, and I wrote the poems month by month. A lot of those superstitions do lodge themselves inside you, don't they? I still feel a bit worried about walking under a ladder, and breaking a mirror. All of these superstitions that grew thousands of years ago, maybe as a warning to take care.

The book has a character named Wyman-Elvis who sings 'Love Me Tender'. What does Elvis Presley mean to you?
Well, I loved Elvis, as a lot of children of my era did, and I still love Elvis. I love everything about him. I could lose myself in that voice, but not only that, the way he looked as well. He is almost a godlike figure in *Orlam*.

Recently, a *Guardian* profile of you described you as "one-time muse of Nick Cave". Does that irk you after all these years?
That's happened all my life. It doesn't upset me in any way. And it must be hard for Nick as well, but that's the way things are.

Over the past few years, you have released the demos to every album you've put out so far. Did that make you hear any of your songs differently?
Yeah, it was interesting. It actually made me want to go back to demo'ing on my four-track again. The album I've just done, I literally sang in the phone; I didn't even demo it, because I didn't want to get attached to the demo versions. But then I felt like I'd missed out on an important part of the process, so it made me want to start doing that again.

On your last tour, you sang *Rid of Me*'s '50ft Queenie'. How do those early songs, where you're hollering, feel now?
I was in my late teens, early 20s, when I'd written some of those songs. At that time, it was a type of expression I needed. And things change. You get older. Not all of the songs I feel able to play any more, as much as I love them, because I feel that I'm now an older woman that couldn't sing those words with any conviction. But '50ft Queenie' I can, because that's a character that I can imagine, and I can inhabit. ®

STEVE GULLICK

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SCAN ME

CLOSE-UP

Billy Eichner's Big Gay Hollywood Rom-Com

The co-writer and star of Bros *explains how he made a landmark same-sex comedy for the ages*

BY BRIAN HIATT

"I NEVER THOUGHT a major studio would do an authentically gay film," says Billy Eichner, "and treat it the same way they would *Bridesmaids* or *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*." Eichner is the star of *Bros*, the groundbreaking, instant-classic gay rom-com that he also co-wrote, which is due in cinemas on 28 October, with a big push from Universal Studios. In the movie, co-written and directed by Nick Stoller (who also directed *Sarah Marshall*) and co-produced by Judd Apatow, Eichner plays Bobby, a media personality who finds his neurotic self-sufficiency disrupted when he falls in love with Aaron (Luke Macfarlane), a guileless lawyer. For Eichner, arguably still best known for the daredevil comedy of his pedestrian-accosting, celebrity-teasing series *Billy on the Street*, becoming a leading man at 43 feels like a belated return to a path he always meant to pursue. "As a kid, you don't think, 'I could be the star of this movie if only I wasn't gay,'" he says. "I went to see Tom Hanks movies and thought, 'I could do something like that.' It was only in my mid-20s when I started to think, 'I'll be lucky if I can just play the neighbour on a sitcom.' Because that's what Hollywood was telling me."

A romantic comedy that's not about straight people opens the door for tons of fresh material.

It's a peek at a culture of dating and sex that straight people think they understand, but they don't. Two men together is a very specific romantic situation. Because yes, we're gay. But we're still men. I think straight people think we're basically women. We are men! I always say to my straight male friends, "Think about all the weird, fucked-up male shit you have in your brain, about sex and monogamy and being vulnerable, and now times that by two." That's a complicated situation, and we've really never seen it explored.

Bobby's opening rant, extracted in the trailer, is a brilliant meta attack on the idea of making a gay movie that'd make straight guys comfortable. How did you come up with it?

It's been on my mind. We're getting so much queer content, and it's all great and a sign of progress. But queer people have spent a lot of time telling stories about ourselves while being concerned that we're palatable to straight audiences. For me and a lot of my friends, when we watch some of those shows, although there are gay characters, we don't recognise those people. They're two-dimensional, wearing cutesy little outfits, and it's all done with this satirical veil. One of my goals with *Bros* was to lose that archness and have the characters feel like fully fleshed-out, complicated, funny, sad, three-dimensional people.

Sexuality aside, a big, lush, urbane studio comedy about grown-ups is actually a throwback at this point.

I'm in my 40s, and I look around at movies in general – especially comedies – and say, "Where are the adults?" [*Laughs*] I grew up with those great James L. Brooks movies and Nora Ephron movies and Woody Allen movies. I wanted to hold [*Bros*] to a higher standard than what's passing for rom-coms these days. But as much as I love *Broadcast News*, *Moonstruck*, *Annie Hall*, *Tootsie*, LGBTQ people are completely ignored in those worlds. We weren't even the best friend!

You've said that you never experienced homophobia until you entered the entertainment business. What form did that take?

In 2006, I had a manager who represented a lot of Broadway talent. She said, "I'm inviting big agents to your next stage show. Can you make it a little less gay this month?" I was shocked. It was insulting, and also impractical, because that would be like literally changing my entire personality. I said, "You don't really know what you're dealing with, because I have a rebellious streak, and I'm not going to deal with that shit." [I got] signed anyway. But she wasn't wrong. It was a real obstacle in my comedy at the time.

What was it like coming to terms with your identity growing up?

My perspective on these things has always been so skewed, because I was born and raised in New York City, with very liberal, accepting parents who both lived in the West Village in the 60s and the 70s. And I'm not saying they were dying for me to be gay, but they knew who I was really early on, and they were so supportive.

There's a part in *Bros* where a teacher questions whether elementary-school kids are old enough to learn about gay history. Did that end up being more timely than you expected, given what's going on in Florida with the "Don't Say Gay" law?

I could not have anticipated that. In fact, I remember writing that [part] and thinking, "I hope people don't think that this is unrealistic," because it seemed that we were making progress. But we were never taught our own history as LGBTQ people, even in a threadbare, generalised way. We have no sense of ourselves historically. And I don't think we realise what that did to us, [to] know nothing about ourselves.

What's the closest experience you've had in real life to the romance in the movie, where your self-reliant character finds himself falling in love for the first time relatively late in life?

I had an experience in my mid-30s where I had not seriously dated anyone in a long time, and, all of a sudden, I met someone who really shook me up, who I fell for very quickly. It was short-lived. But it did open my eyes in terms of relationships and made me think, 'Oh, maybe I shouldn't completely

ignore that part of my life.' I was talking to friends about it, and they said, "Wow, Billy has feelings!" Anyway, that didn't work out, and then I put the wall right back up! [*Laughs*]

You're working with Paul Rudnick on a movie for Amazon called *Ex-Husbands*. How's that coming along?

We're just starting to write it, but I'm very excited. Sitting around during Covid, I thought, 'What if we did a gay version of *The War of the Roses*?' Because we see so many happy gay couples. We get gay people falling in love and everything is beautiful and hunky-dory. This is the other side. Just because we can get married doesn't mean marriage is the answer to everything for gay people and that all those marriages are gonna work out. And there's a certain pressure on LGBTQ people who get married to really try to work it out. So I thought the idea of a gay divorce would be really funny.

You stopped doing *Billy on the Street* in 2017, but culturally it feels like it's never left.

It's had a whole new life over the course of the pandemic. It's on streaming services, and the biggest thing of all became TikTok – which, I don't have a TikTok page! Fans started to rip the clips, and there are multiple *Billy on the Street* pages on TikTok with millions upon millions of views. I took a look the other day [and] there was one clip with 50 million views. There are probably 12-year-olds watching them who were literally not born when I first started doing them, which is really shocking. It just keeps having this crazy afterlife.

You had a moment on there years ago with Chris Pratt. You tell him something like, "Someday you're gonna play gay and win an Oscar, and I'm still gonna be on the street doing this shit."

It was kidding. And it wasn't kidding. Although, look at me now! [*Laughs*] So I mean, he'll still win an Oscar for playing gay, but I'm not on the street any more. At least I get to be in a movie playing gay also. So that is progress.

Photograph by **Lauren Withrow**

MUSIC

Staying high

Tove Lo embraced her feminine side – on her own terms – to rediscover her music and heal past pain

BY **EMMA WILKES**

TOVE LO didn't always embrace her femininity. When she was first trying to break into the music industry, it was something she thought she had to bury to get ahead. "I felt like if I expressed more of my masculine traits, it would be easier for me to get a foot in the door and get ahead and be part of the men's club that [the music industry] was at the beginning of my career," Lo says, lounging on the bed in a hotel room in Estonia, where she's about to start filming the music video for recent single '2 Die 4'. "I started to view my feminine traits as weaknesses instead of strengths."

It's been close to a decade since the Swedish singer-songwriter made her breakthrough, with early single 'Habits (Stay High)' becoming a sleeper hit after a remix, simply titled 'Stay High', which blew up online. Although it has some way to go, Lo observes that there's been a sea change since then, particularly after the #MeToo movement, which began in 2017. "I've been seeing a lot more celebration of feminine traits, and it's made me like those parts of myself a bit more again."

Making a record revolving around femininity wasn't a conscious decision – it just happened to be the theme that unified the songs that Lo had chosen to make the final cut of the album. "A lot of it's very emotional and very vulnerable," she says, qualities which Lo herself considers to be more feminine. "I'm going through all the thoughts and feelings and fears and emotions I've been feeling the past two years with all this change, and I had a moment to think about my life and look at the journey I've done as an artist." The album's working title was the more simple *Feminine,* before it was altered to *Dirt Femme* to more adequately describe how Lo sees her femininity in relation to herself. "This is me embracing my feminine traits, but I'm a bit rough around the edges," she adds.

The groundwork for what would become her fifth album began in January 2020, when Lo wrote lead single 'No One Dies From Love' hoping to release it in the summer to offer something new to play out when festival season rolled around. However, the Covid pandemic meant that wasn't to be. The stillness and monotony of that year brought a drought in terms of her creativity. Lo only began writing again when things started to look a little brighter in 2021, in particular after shooting the film *The Emigrants* in Sweden when her creative itch came back.

"There's something different about this record that makes me think of my first album," Lo reflects. The pandemic brought her back to a time akin to the days before her career had taken off, particularly as she was writing in her bedroom again, as if she was journalling, and was without a record deal having finished her contract with Universal (*Dirt Femme* is her first album on her own label). "You have your whole life to write your first album, but only a few months or a year tops to write your second and third," she says. "There's a pattern that starts to happen and when you're writing those albums, you're out on the road, you're doing interviews, you're still being a performer, being an artist. I didn't feel like an artist during this time at all. I felt like a bit like me before this whole surreal, magic thing happened to me and my dreams came true."

Dirt Femme is an album where Lo is "asking a lot of questions, but I don't really have any answers". In this time, she was thinking particularly about her relationship to tradition, and by extension traditional femininity, after she got married. Marriage hadn't really been something she'd envisioned for herself, but deciding to tie the knot was an unusually traditional event – particularly since she, as a queer person, was entering a straight-passing marriage – in her generally non-traditional life. She chews this over in one of *Dirt Femme's* earliest highlights, "*Suburbia: 'I don't want suburbia… I can't be no Stepford wife*".

"I never wanted that normal life. But I've found a person that I want to be with, and I loved getting married. It was so romantic"

"I had a lot of friends from my past who live a bit more traditionally, who were so excited that I got married, and it was almost like, 'You're normal like us!'" she remembers. "I never wanted that normal life. But I've found a person that I want to be with, and I loved getting married. It was so romantic. But I thought, 'Am I turning into a person now that I didn't want to become?'"

The time she had with her own thoughts also brought her to reflect upon the past, particularly when she had bulimia. Shooting *The Emigrants* required her to lose weight in a short space of time to play a starving prostitute, and it was the first time she had been on a diet since her recovery. It brought back memories of counting calories and the anxiety flooding her brain that she once experienced when she had to eat in front of someone. "It made me need to write about it. That's how it happens for me, I'll go through something and then I have to write about it."

The resulting song is 'Grapefruit', the first song that Tove Lo has ever been able to write about her bulimia, something she's been trying to create for a decade or so. "I'd never really been ready. I've been healthy for a very long time now, and I feel like it's been long enough now that I feel distant from it. I'm very proud of myself for being able to go on that diet, stop and then go back to my normal weight and not be too heavily affected by it."

Overall, however, Tove Lo hopes *Dirt Femme* is an album for any mood or occasion. "There are songs to give you comfort, to make you dance and feel sexy, to make you cry," she says. "You can go through your life with this album."

MONI HAWROTH

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BENJIFLOW
BET ON HIMSELF AND HE'S STARTING TO REAP THE REWARDS

By Will "ill Will" Lavin

PRESENTED BY BACARDÍ

The following feature is a part of Music Liberates Music-- a collaboration between Bacardi and Rolling Stone that's aims to brighten the spotlight on rising music stars across the globe

Persistence is an essential trait for anyone chasing their dreams, especially those trying to break through in today's wildly oversaturated music industry. "I was so close to giving up chasing a career in music so many times," reveals North London singer, songwriter, and producer BenjiFlow. The 26-year-old is one of three artists BACARDÍ has partnered with for its latest Music Liberates Music program, an initiative created to amplify rising musical talent. "Things can get tough and feel like they're never gonna happen for you, but you've got to stay the course."

It also helps to have talent, which Benji possesses in spades. Born into a musical family, his father, a Pentecostal pastor at an East London church, performed in gospel groups alongside Benji's mother, who he met during the latter part of their teens. Benji's sisters and cousins would often sing background vocals at the church and his mother's side of the family was comprised of saxophone players, drummers and keyboardists. "When I look back on it now, it was incredible," Benji tells *Rolling Stone*.

The young crooner, who grew up in Edmonton, a small town in the London borough of Enfield, is grateful for his family's rich musical lineage and his Jamaican roots. "If my parents weren't playing gospel music, they were listening to Bob Marley, Dennis Brown, and loads of other reggae greats," he says.

As he moved into his teenage years, Benji's musical tastes broadened. When he wasn't listening to the popular grime artists of the day – Dizzee Rascal, Wiley, Chip, and others – he was exploring the sounds of Herbie Hancock, George Duke, Norah Jones, Joni Mitchell, and even the Spice Girls. "'2 Become 1' is a slapper," he says of the girl group's 1996 chart-topping hit. But his favorite artists, and the ones who would ultimately go on to become his biggest influences, were Kanye West, Pharrell, and Skepta, the Tottenham grime MC that Benji calls his "UK hero."

It wasn't long before Benji decided to try his hand at rapping. "I wasn't that good," he says of his early lyrical capabilities. During this time, he met Ragz Originale, his longtime friend and collaborator and the producer responsible for some of the tracks on Skepta's Mercury Prize-winning 2016 album, Konnichiwa. Eventually, Benji and Ragz, along with rapper Oscar WorldPeace and singer Cartae, joined forces to form the Minikingz collective.

"We weren't super close at first, but we were the ones who carried on making music after everyone else stopped," Benji says of Ragz. Their bond grew tighter once Benji, who had turned his attention to producing, returned from college where he studied music technology. "We met up and I played him some of my beats," explains Benji. "He said I had some good ideas but that my drums needed work." Ragz offered to help Benji with his beats and returned the following day with a hard drive full of drum kits. "That's when I think we knew we would be really, really good friends," he says.

From there, Benji dedicated his time to developing as a producer while trying to get some high-profile placements; however, the goal proved elusive. "I faced a lot of rejection," Benji explains. "People were telling me my stuff was too left or that we should try something another producer was doing." It wasn't until Benji decided to start producing for himself that the tide began to turn in the right direction. "I would record reference tracks with me singing on them," he recalls. "One day, I was playing one of them in the studio, and a guy I was producing at the time walked in and heard it. He loved it. It was only a rough demo, but he asked if I could burn him a copy so he could take it home with him. That's the moment I decided to pursue singing."

Taking a risk, which is something Benji and the rest of the Minikingz collective openly promote, he quit his day job and put his faith in the music. "I did it to put absolute focus into the craft and to give myself the best chance, rather than going about it halfheartedly," he says. "I didn't expect the music to go anywhere; I just wanted to make something really good to give to the world."

And that's exactly what he did when he released his breakthrough single, the infectiously incandescent "Deep End," back in late 2018. Underscored by a mesmerizing Afro-Cuban rhythm, the Benji and Ragz-produced track served as the lead single for his debut EP *BENERGY*, which also delivered the sun-kissed, guitar-led single "Can't Lose."

But with so many new artists coming out each week, how did Benji separate himself from the pack? "Whenever I release something, I want there to be an experience behind the music," he says, expressing a desire for something more tangible. "I want someone to feel something when they hear it."

This tactic aligns with BACARDÍ's mission to promote a more inclusive and creative environment through its Music Liberates Music program. Powered by the collaboration between promising up-and-comers and industry heavyweights, part of the initiative sees Grammy-winning producer Boi-1da team up with three musicians from different parts of the world to create original tracks. "It's crazy that I'm going to be making a track with him, but I'm very ready for the moment. I can't wait to see where his mind goes when we get in the studio and what he thinks my next step should be musically."

And just like Boi-1da is doing with him, Benji hopes that one day he'll be able to help bolster future generations of artists. "I want to be a part of guiding the best talent as they come up," he says. "I just want to help artists become their own moguls." As Benji sees it, musical liberation is something to be paid forward.

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Is the UK running out of babies?

For a generation without assets or financial security and now facing another chapter in the prolonged economic crisis, money is the deciding factor in whether to have children – or not, as Rolling Stone UK *investigates*

BY EMMA GARLAND

ALAN* HAS DONE everything a young person in their 30s is traditionally "expected" to do. He's in a long-term relationship with his partner of six and a half years. In late 2020, they bought a house together in Belfast, where Alan is from. They both have stable jobs with salaries that allow them a modest lifestyle. They're basically the paragon of neoliberalism: a professional couple on the property ladder, earning above average during a period of economic downturn. And yet they still can't afford to have children.

"Kids cost money – loads of it. There's food, and prams, and childcare, and everything. Without exception, by the end of every month I'm comfortably into my overdraft, and all I have to keep alive at the moment is me," Alan says despondently. "I suppose I'm a bit taken aback at being 32, having a reasonably well-paid job, and not being in any way comfortable."

Despite what your Instagram feed might suggest, this story has become the rule rather than the exception, as wages struggle to keep up with annual inflation, the escalating cost of living and a housing market out of control. As a result, many people like Alan are entering a phase of life where they expected to be able to start a family but, confronted with the freshly sharpened pressures of time and increasing age, are finding themselves at a loss. For those in less fortunate circumstances, the outlook must seem even bleaker.

"For a generation living though their third worst economic crisis, the definitive issue is money"

Against this backdrop of millennial impoverishment, there is growing panic over the fact that the UK is "running out of babies". Births have been falling steadily in every nation since 2011. In Northern Ireland, the population of children aged 0-14 has decreased by 9 per cent over the past decade. Since the most recent peak in 2012, the number of live births in England and Wales has dropped by 15.9 per cent. In Scotland, the number of live births registered last year was the second lowest annual total since records began in 1855. Traditionally, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) has attributed this decline to social changes – people having children later in life and fewer of them, women focusing on their education and careers, medical advances such as lower child mortality and access to contraception. These are still significant factors, but for a generation now living through their third "worst economic crisis in [insert

ISTOCK

historic number of years]", the definitive issue is income.

"When my boyfriend and I chat about the prospect of having children, the sticking point is always money," says Jess, 28, who grew up in Clackmannanshire, in the heart of Scotland, and now lives in south-east London. "We spend around half our pay cheques on rent each month with the knowledge that we could be evicted at our landlord's whim and priced out of the city."

Until recently, Jess had never really envisioned herself as a mother. Growing up in a small rural village, many of her peers dropped out of school at 16 to have kids or started to couple off and settle down "before actually doing anything for themselves". "I desperately wanted to leave my hometown and felt like being a 'career woman' was the best way forward," she remembers. "It wasn't until I met my boyfriend that I started to think about having kids less as a burden and more as a chance to build a better life that's about love and being in it together, rather than work achievements and wealth."

Like many, Jess moved to London for opportunities that weren't available at home. Now, she finds herself in a double bind where her work and social life revolve around a city that's increasingly difficult to build a future in. "Spending so much of our income on housing is obviously a factor, but it's the lack of somewhere to put down roots that makes me especially wary," she says. "Extras – toys, clothes, days out – can be kept to a minimum when money's tight, but a child needs a stable and secure home, and we can't guarantee that right now." The overriding feeling seems to be that, as Jess says, "You can't win unless you're wealthy. If we address deprivation and make society fairer, young people will be able to make [major] life decisions without money worries clouding things."

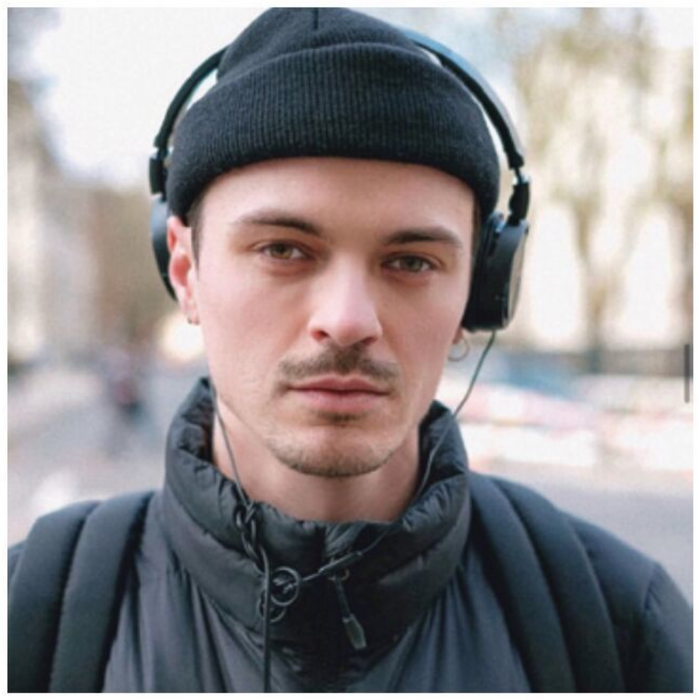
JESS
Providing a stable home for a child is a priority

Housing is an issue for Cleo and her partner, too. As a trans couple considering adoption, the biggest hurdle they face isn't the process itself but trying to find a suitable place to raise a child. "Many of the properties we look at that have the additional bedroom or a garden space are just out of our price range, and the worse the housing market gets the more it seems like it'll be another couple of years until we can get there," Cleo says. The couple currently live in a small flat in a Norwich suburb that they're trying to buy after the landlord decided to sell it out from under them, but it has nowhere near the space they would need to start a family – something Cleo, now in her 30s, has wanted since her early 20s. "I've always been very maternal," she says. "I feel like it's something that's very important to me, and something that I'd be good at. Also, particularly when you look at adoption, there are more children who need homes than there are homes going, so it feels like the right thing to do."

Although the adoption process is far from easy, many of their friends in queer relationships have navigated it successfully, so they are not particularly worried about this aspect. As it stands, though, they're struggling to put roots down so that they can start their family. "The complaint of this generation – particularly targeted at the LGBT community, actually – is that people aren't having enough children. We're talking about ageing populations and dropping birth rates, and it's often treated as a cultural issue when there are lots of people who want to start a family but can't for economic reasons," observes Cleo.

Addressing the "baby issue" in a report last September, The Social Market Foundation (SMF) warned that the low birth rate would ultimately lead to a shortage of working-age adults and further economic decline as the population gets older. To tackle the crisis, the report argues for a "pronatalist" approach – that is, encouraging more people to have children through forms of government support such as cheaper childcare, extra parental leave, and direct payments to parents. For example, in France, there is a "birth grant" worth €950 (£810). In Berlin and Hamburg, daycare is free for all children from birth. But in the UK, childcare costs have gone up by more than £2,000 a year since the Conservatives took office in 2010. Adding to the worsening cost of living crisis, parents in the UK now face the highest childcare costs in Europe and the fifth highest in the world. It's no surprise, then, that many young people are worried that starting a family is a goal that's simply out of their price range.

"It's literally the only thing I talk about at the moment," says Christian, a 32-year-old filmmaker based in London. As a cis gay man, Christian feels "privileged" to not be racing against a biological clock. However, he does find himself reckoning with time lost. "The prospect of your own children is something that isn't extended



CHRISTIAN
As a gay man in his 30s, he now wants to start a family

to [gay men], and I've sort of navigated through my life so far thinking that I didn't want children because I couldn't have them," he tells me. "But reaching my early 30s, I feel like I'm intrinsically missing out on something far bigger than a career and partying."

As a single person earning an average salary and living in London, Christian says the mental image of being a parent is a "faint" one. As he began to watch his straight and wealthier friends get pregnant, adopt, or move out of the city, he had a "wake-up call" of sorts.

"We run in tandem with our friends throughout our 20s. We roughly earn the same amount, we're all climbing the same ladders, going to the same parties. It feels fairly equal – sort of. But [when I started] looking at what my options were if I wanted to have children, it felt like there were none," he laments. "By the time you hit 30 you really notice the difference between those who have family money and those who don't, and the cost of living has changed so drastically over the past few years that the luxury of being childless and having the disposable income to have a laugh with has been compromised."

For those feeling the pressure in their 30s, fertility treatments such as IVF and egg freezing have become more common. According to the regulatory body HFEA, IVF birth rates for patients under 43 years old have steadily increased since 2013. The number of egg and embryo storage cycles have also increased, as freezing techniques have improved and become more commonplace. Again, though, these are luxuries afforded to those who have the financial resources to pay for them in the first place. The cost of private IVF treatment in the UK varies wildly, although the NHS estimates it's at least £5,000 per cycle. The full process for egg freezing – an invasive and often unsuccessful procedure (data suggests the birth rate for women using their own frozen eggs is 18 per cent) – costs £7,000-£8,000 on average.

Accessing fertility treatments through the NHS is a postcode lottery, especially in England, where funding is set by local integrated care boards (in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, funding is set nationally). But generally speaking, IVF and egg freezing are only funded by the NHS for medical reasons; for example, if the individual is experiencing fertility issues, going through early menopause, or receiving cancer treatment. For those in need of a lifeline for the future because they can't afford to start a family now, fertility treatments are just another financial hurdle.

James, 33, met his partner at the beginning of the pandemic. They spent the long weeks of the first lockdown having nightly Zoom dates before they could meet in person, so they talked about "literally everything". James told her about his teenage daughter from a previous marriage and they shared their hopes for the future. "I definitely want more [children], and realistically if it was urgent that we did have kids now, maybe due to unknown fertility issues, we could get by," he explains. "The worry is that we want to provide our children with opportunities that we feel we missed out on."

James was raised in South Wales in the 80s and 90s by a single mother, who worked incredibly hard to provide for him. Even so, there were times when they couldn't afford to pay for basic things like electricity. His partner's mother died when she was young. Partly as a result, they both feel a heightened drive to give their kids the best possible start in life. "I'm not talking about extravagances like private education," James says. "We both just want to be able to provide, and it's a tough ask to commit to that with the uncertainty of the future and current economic issues."

Cleo echoes this sentiment, saying that "it wouldn't be sensible to try to pursue" adoption until she's in a position to do so. "I'm one of five children and growing up we were quite poor. It was really challenging sometimes. I wouldn't want to raise my kids in that kind of environment."

"Many of the properties we look at that have the additional bedroom are out of our price range"
— Cleo

"It's not often I think to myself: 'How much worse can things get?' But I've been thinking that pretty much daily for the past six months," James adds. "Looking towards the future, whenever we hit the bottom of this rut, that'll be the time to start planning the family we want to have. But I just don't know when that will be."

Despite the financial obstacles, starting a family is something Cleo and her partner are still gunning for. "For years and years, I thought, 'People like me don't buy houses, we don't have kids, we don't get that kind of life.' But what that mindset actually did was deter me from getting started," she says. "When you're in that mess, you're like, 'The big change isn't going to come, so I don't have any power, so I might as well not try' – and that is true 90 per cent of the time, but it also stops you from making the small changes that can start getting you to where you want to be." Although a lot of the fixes might be big picture stuff that feel like they will never come, "it's important to not get ground down by that."

Clearly, what people would like to see is support and reassurance at a state level. That means things like building more social housing, rent controls, free or low-cost childcare, better financial support for parents, improved maternity and paternity leave – anything that will, as Alan puts it, "reassure people that there is a degree of solid, unequivocal government support in some shape or form".

One government proposal to lower childcare costs was introduced this spring as a way to alleviate pressure on families during the energy crisis. However, it involved increasing the number of children one member of staff can legally supervise rather than slashing fees – a suggestion that has been branded "pathetic" by Shadow Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson, while TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady has called for "a proper funding settlement".

Outside of Parliament, potential solutions have included more immigration to help re-balance the population and taxing the childless – the latter being a particularly cruel suggestion for those who want to start families but are delayed by financial circumstances.

"It's similar to the Roe v Wade conversations we've been seeing in the US," reflects Jess. "So much fervour for people having more children while providing absolutely no incentive for us to actually do so."

In their report last year, the SMF concluded that any government policy that would "significantly alter" the fertility rate would likely cost tens of billions of pounds. Under the current regime, such an investment in our collective future seems unlikely.

**Alan's name has been changed*

ISTOCK

CLEO
Financial constraints are delaying her adoption plans

RS REPORTS

From Hockey Goon to Psychedelics Guru

As part of America's National Hockey League, Riley Cote pushed his body to its limit. After his playing days, he expanded his mind

BY STEVE VOLK

RILEY COTE'S journey to enlightenment began in earnest when a hulking man punched him in the face. Cote, now 40 and retired from professional hockey, remembers the moment with a dark laugh. He'd got into this particular bust-up one night during the 2009 season with one of the most vicious fighters of the American National Hockey League (NHL) and took the worst of it, waking the next day with his left eye blackened shut.

'What,' he asked himself, 'am I doing?'

He drove to the Philadelphia Flyers training facility and got into the shower. Feeling congested, he reached for a tissue. He didn't realise he'd suffered a cracked sinus, so what happened next was physics. When he blew his nose, the air – rather than coming out of his nostrils – inflated his face. The pressure surged instantly behind his good eye and closed it tight.

Team trainer Derek Settlemyre heard Cote scream. "His whole face had swollen up," Settlemyre recalls. "We tell them, if they think they have a fracture, 'Don't blow your nose' – and he did."

After eight years in pro hockey (four in the NHL, four hopping around its minor-league teams), Cote felt his retirement bearing down. As an NHL "enforcer" – a player whose main role is to get into fights – he'd taken countless hits on the ice. Off it, he self-medicated with booze and drugs. He'd brutalised his body inside and out by the tender age of 28. "I damaged my brain," Cote says. "Punching it and dehydrating it and partying my ass off."

Today, Cote is a new man, with a mane of long brown hair, a yoga-trimmed physique, and an aura of ease in his own skin. It is a transformation he credits largely to psychedelic drugs. Since retiring, Cote has emerged as one of the sports world's most vocal advocates for what he calls "plant medicines" – from cannabis, itself a light psychedelic, to weightier hallucinogens including DMT and magic mushrooms – to treat post-concussion symptoms (think headaches, insomnia, depression, and possibly, the degenerative brain condition known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE).

In 2017, Cote co-founded Athletes for Care, a group that promotes research into the physical and emotional health issues athletes face and novel paths for treatment. He regularly speaks at conferences on the benefits of psychedelics. And, perhaps most importantly, he reaches out to players who are known to be struggling post-career, even arranging magic-mushroom ceremonies where they can safely experiment with psychedelics.

Cote understands the hesitation surrounding these drugs. While psychedelics fill him with "love", "gratitude" and a "connection to a higher energy source", they are technically illegal throughout most of the US. Beyond that, the experience, whether good or bad, can be intense. Certain users experience not just so-called bad trips, but also psychotic breaks from reality. Cote says talking to a first-timer about using psychedelics is basically like asking them: "Do you want to see God? Are you sure?" The ask is so big, the answer is often no.

COTE WAS WORRIED when he walked into the lunch area at the Good Hope House Retreat Center in Jamaica one day in April, got a green smoothie, and waited for one of the biggest weekends of his life to unfold. An ESPN crew was coming to film a magic-mushroom ceremony he'd helped organise for a group of retired athletes, including former players from the NHL and NFL. All had pledged to eat "breakthrough" doses – enough, that is, to induce a mystical state – of mushrooms containing psilocybin, which is legal in Jamaica.

The opportunity to showcase mushrooms as medicine to a mainstream television audience was a precious thing, but as Cote sat with some early arrivals, he couldn't enjoy it. He kept mulling a more practical concern: would everyone actually show up? Two people in particular – Steve Downie, an ex-Flyers teammate, and Justin Renfrow, a former NFL lineman – were due any minute. Or not. In the past 11 years, Cote has invited a lot of people to venture down the magic-mushroom path, and most who say yes subsequently run into excuses not to follow through. In fact, second-thought declinations are so common in Cote's experience that he doesn't judge anyone for them.

"It's scary, right?" Cote says. "There's a fear associated with it. There's a lot of unknowns, like, 'Where am I going? What am I getting myself into?' It all sounds grand when you're sitting on your

CENTRED ICE
Cote advocates for psychedelics to treat the effects of traumatic brain injury

JIM TROCCHIO

couch, you know, and talking about it via text or phone. But when you've actually got to be committed to something and actually do it, it's another story."

There is some irony here. Since Cote began proselytising, scientific research bolstering the case for psychedelics has accumulated. Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore established a centre for psychedelic and consciousness research in 2019, and has published 50 peer-reviewed papers that indicate psychedelics help treat depression, promote psychological insight, alleviate anxiety in cancer patients, break smoking addiction, and improve overall life satisfaction. In 2018, the Food and Drug Administration, which had for decades held the line against psychedelics, granted "breakthrough therapy" status to psilocybin use for severe depression, an act designed to accelerate the drug development and review process. MDMA, better known as the club drug ecstasy, also won breakthrough status, and could receive full approval to treat post-traumatic stress disorder next year.

At the same time, the discovery of CTE has created a crisis across all contact sports, linked to myriad symptoms, including memory loss, confusion, impaired judgment, impulse-control problems, aggression, depression, anxiety, suicidality, and progressive dementia. The condition can only be confirmed after death, but the list of the dead with CTE is long, including four soccer players, more than 300 NFL players, and at least a dozen high-profile hockey players: Stan Mikita, Bob Probert, Derek Boogaard, Jeff Parker, Wade Belak, Larry Zeidel, Reggie Fleming, Rick Martin, Steve Montador, Zarley Zalapski, Todd Ewen and Dan Maloney.

Dr Julie Holland, a practising New York psychiatrist and psychedelics expert, says the application of psychedelics to sports medicine is new, but makes sense based on the current scientific literature. "We know that many psychedelics have really potent anti-inflammatory effects," says Holland, who is also a longtime medical adviser for the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, or MAPS. "The other thing is, they're being explored for treating neurodegenerative disorders, including chronic traumatic encephalopathy. These athletes that get multiple blows to the head [represent] a case where you really need not only anti-inflammatory effects, but this purported neuroplasticity that comes with psychedelics."

Studies largely involving rodents suggest that psychedelics reduce neuroinflammation, a key component of both Alzheimer's disease and CTE; produce healing from brain injury; and possibly even prompt neurogenesis, or the birth of new neurons. They have also been shown to increase the density of dendritic spines – small protrusions found on nerve cells – in turn spurring the growth of neuronal connections that can be lost in cases of chronic stress or depression. Some human experiments suggest that

psychedelics reduce activity in the default mode network (DMN), a web of connected brain regions responsible for self-awareness, social thinking and thoughts about the past and future. The mystic feelings that users like Cote report – such as the loss of a sense of self, and the ability to set aside the past or think afresh about the future – are thought to arise from this reset of the DMN.

Cote started Athletes for Care with such edgier therapies in mind – initially just cannabis, and then psychedelics as the encouraging science grew. And although he might not be the group's most famous retiree (members include former NFL star running backs Tiki Barber and Chris Johnson, and former UFC champ "Bas" Rutten), he looms as perhaps its most pivotal figure.

He is a partner in a hemp-derived CBD recovery product line called BodyChek Wellness and an adviser to Wake, a multipronged company that is collaborating with Baltimore's Lieber Institute for Brain Medicine to use genetics research to develop psilocybin-based treatments tailored to individual patients – a potentially dramatic step toward eliminating "bad" or ineffective trips.

At AFC's most recent board meeting, in March, Cote led a deep discussion around psychedelics, presenting the current body of research and urging the group to strengthen its commitment to incorporate psychedelics into its work.

"Riley has been a leader in this space for a long, long time," says Marvin Washington, a former NFL defensive lineman, who won a Super Bowl with the Denver Broncos in the late 90s and became a pro-cannabis activist in retirement. "He was the first athlete I ever heard talking about psychedelics."

The pair were at a cannabis-related conference several years ago when Cote waxed on about the mental-health benefits associated with taking both small and reality-shifting doses of psilocybin. Washington was surprised and started checking out Cote's claims. "He was right," he says. "He deserves a lot of credit for being in so early on all plant medicines."

IN HIS EARLY DAYS playing hockey, as a teenager, Cote discovered that a bong hit in the morning helped him maintain his focus through a long workout. Later, after his skill set proved unequal to becoming a scorer, he remodelled himself as an "enforcer," or goon, a hockey player whose main job is to punish opponents for any penalties the referee missed. Undersized for the role at six feet one and a playing weight of over 15 stone, Cote brawled his way into the league, racking up more than 200 professional hockey fights. He increased his cannabis use then, smoking weed on a regular basis and finding that it helped him sleep, recover and manage the anxiety and trauma of bare-knuckle fighting. Magic mushrooms, when he took them, were more of a party drug, a way to enhance the lights and music at a concert.

Cote's delivery while retelling his own journey is understated. But his presence speaks loudly. His face is rugged, with a nose that moves this way and that, like a switchback trail, to suggest his past. His hands are gnarled. By the time he retired, he had accumulated a litany of injuries: torn ligaments in both knees, a dislocated finger, broken ankle, separated shoulder, three broken noses and at least four diagnosed concussions. Cote knew back then that he needed to heal up, and intuitively wanted to build on his past experiences with cannabis and psychedelics. So he began reading deeply, discovering that cannabis and psychedelics bore rich histories as natural medicines.

Cote also did as he learned, securing five grams of mushrooms, or what's known as a "heroic dose", for his first ceremonial trip. He set an intention to treat the experience as important, even sacred, and arranged his house for the occasion, putting on some ambient music, turning off the electric lights, and setting out a couple of candles. Still, nothing he'd read or done truly prepared him.

Acknowledging the experience was "ineffable, indescribable", Cote reaches for language, doing his best. It was, he says, bliss, and an incredible sense of knowing. Eventually, he lands on something particularly hard to explain to potential initiates: "I felt my ego dissolve."

"It's scary, right? There's a fear associated with [these drugs], a lot of unknowns, like, 'What am I getting myself into?' It all sounds grand when you're talking about it. But when you've got to actually do it, it's another story"
— Cote

This specific result suggests an additional, perhaps unexpected use for psychedelics that might be uniquely valuable to athletes: "For a lot of athletes, and these could be amateurs or professionals," says Cote, "everything you do from a very young age is geared toward achieving success in that sport. It becomes your identity."

In Cote's case, the identity he'd spent so long forging for himself with blood and terror, "jacking up" his emotions to punch people he didn't hate and often admired, lifted off his shoulders during that first trip like he was "shedding his skin" with no more importance or difficulty than he'd remove a coat. "I felt... free," he says.

What Cote experienced was actually a typical effect reported by users, and left him feeling like he could set hockey aside to "do whatever I wanted". He spent the next several years banging away at his new cause, eventually finding a high-profile supporter in Lindy Snider, former vice president for sales with the Flyers and daughter of the team's beloved late owner, Ed Snider. Cote called her and asked for a meeting, Snider says, and came in quoting the science as it stood at the time. She was impressed.

"He's by far one of the leading voices in sports around these issues," Snider says. "And the athletes he's brought into Athletes for Care are all very similar. They've run the gauntlet in the physical realm like nobody else. And, you know, there's associated deeper meaning with looking at all of these alternative ways to ameliorate your health, your mental wellness, your state of being, and Riley is always looking at a higher state of being. Whatever those tools look like that help us get there is what his mission is."

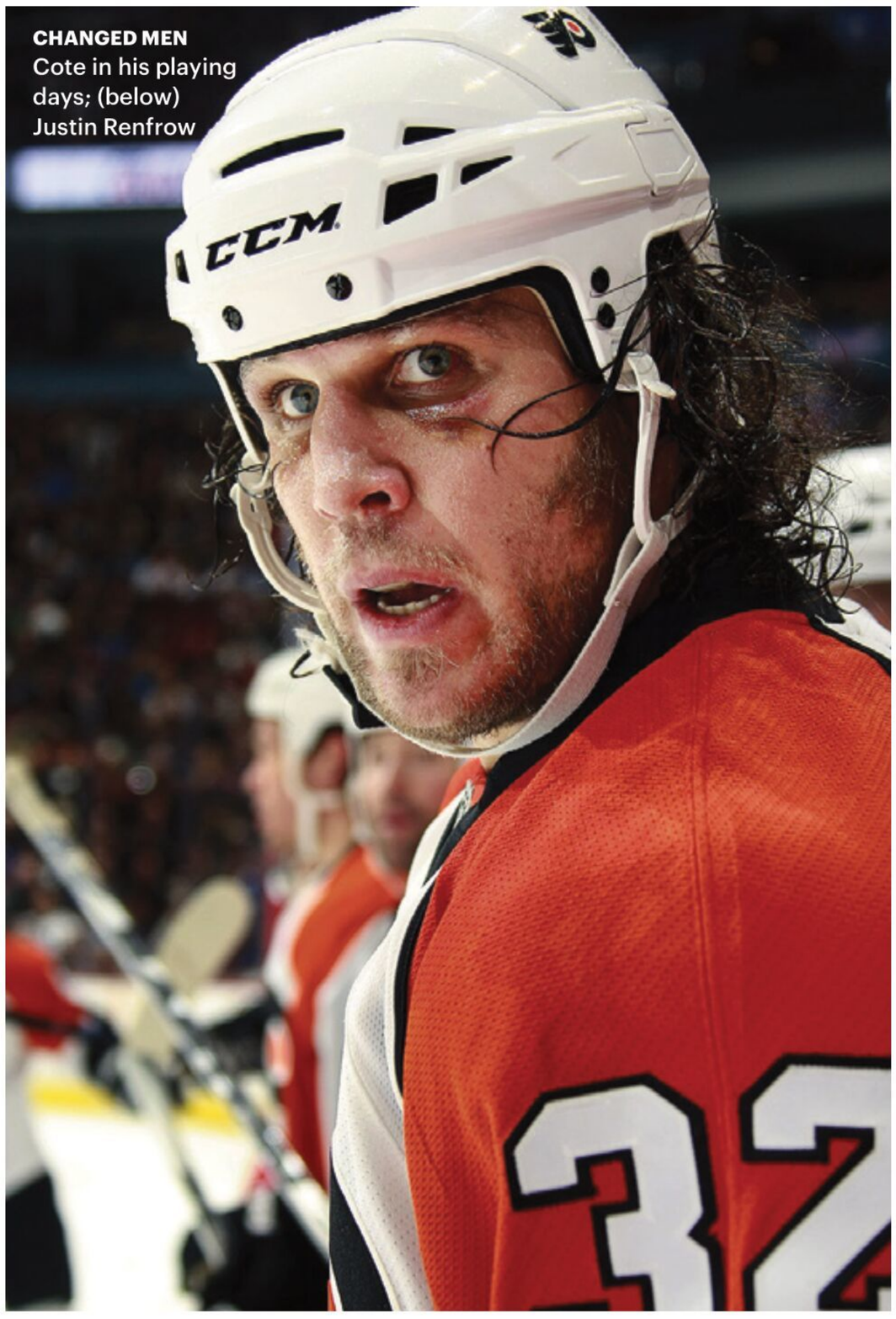
Snider was open to cannabis. She ran a skincare company that made products for cancer patients and knew of the drug's potential as medicine. She also helped get her father some cannabis for relief as he lay dying in 2016. But the evolution of Cote's story has educated her, helping her see that psychedelics, too, bear importance not just in the treatment of brain injury and CTE, but also to help former athletes lead productive, enjoyable post-career lives.

Within the Flyers family, Snider says, she had too often witnessed players suffer a "failure to launch" after retirement. She sadly recalls one player she declines to name who felt so lost after hockey he succumbed to alcoholism and died of liver failure. "I felt we failed him," Snider says. "And it was this notion that there were things that could have helped him, and he didn't have access to this stuff."

It is easy to imagine that athletes would prove particularly challenging to invite on this kind of a trip, the hippie-dippy side of the experience too off-putting for people so deeply task-oriented and rooted in their physical

bodies. But Cote says they are no more resistant on that front than anyone else. "The spiritual side of this is always more difficult to address, in general," he explains. "That's the world we're living in." Still, he routinely pitches the physical benefits as his way in, and finds retired sports stars uniquely receptive. "Elite athletes are always looking for the next best thing and how to optimise their performance," he says. "The average Joe in the Western world doesn't give a shit about optimisation. They don't even know what that word means. They don't understand there's higher levels of performance. So they just think that wherever they're at, that's just the hand that God dealt them."

Washington, the retired NFL player and cannabis activist, tried psilocybin after listening to Cote talk about it. He now describes it as the "next moonshot" beyond cannabis legalisation. He also credits the drug with helping him find a sense of himself "far greater than football".



CHANGED MEN Cote in his playing days; (below) Justin Renfrow

ONE OF COTE'S biggest success stories might be retired NHL star and two-time Stanley Cup champion Daniel Carcillo. Nine years of pro hockey had left Carcillo suffering from light sensitivity, headaches, insomnia, anxiety, depression, slurred speech, suicidal ideation, and more. He was public about it, speaking out towards the end of his career, in 2015, about his concussion history, hockey's disregard for players' health, and his own failed attempts to find some solution in modern medicine.

After Carcillo retired, Cote says he reached out to him for more than a year about trying cannabis and psilocybin. No luck. It was only when Carcillo reached his darkest point, and started thinking about how he might get a rope around the big wood beams in his ceiling, that "desperation," as he describes it, drove him to meet with Cote and learn more.

Cote made arrangements for Carcillo to attend a mushroom ceremony in Colorado, a decriminalised state. That first experience, says Carcillo, included the spiritual sensations that psilocybin induces – and something more. A few days later, Carcillo realised that he could start crossing off symptoms: light sensitivity, slurred speech, his suicidal feelings giving way to hope.

Carcillo came home from Colorado and started taking microdoses of psilocybin and occasional breakthrough amounts. He started to enjoy that sense of rebirth that Cote, Washington, and so many others describe. Soon, he was in the news, crediting Cote with "saving my life".

In May 2020, Carcillo founded Wesana, a start-up trying to develop its own psilocybin treatment and earn FDA approval. He is, perhaps out of necessity, more buttoned up than Cote. "In the space that Riley's in," Carcillo says, "you can talk more freely about what this does for the spirit. For me, when you go down the FDA path, they don't care about that. Like, they don't want to hear that." In fact, Carcillo says, he no longer uses words like "psychedelic" at all in his work. "I say it's a compound found in nature. Most of our medicines are a single extract from a plant found in nature, or fungi. That's the reality."

The effects of that "compound" on his psyche have been profound: "This medicine, the biggest stuff that it does... there is always that feeling that you are enough. And one of the things that I'm really interested in is showing people not only can we recover and be a beacon of hope, but you can break out of what you think you need to stay in and do new things."

In science, a story like Carcillo's might be dismissed as only an anecdote. But his recovery is seemingly validated through brain scans. The images Carcillo received from neurologists before he tried psilocybin showed a brain suffering from decreased connectivity. Big pockets of red signified areas of the brain that weren't communicating. His slurred speech was a byproduct – the signals from one part of his brain having to travel around these red areas, a slowdown that affected his enunciation. According to Mark Wingertzahn, Wesana's chief scientific officer, those initial scans qualified Carcillo for a diagnosis of moderate traumatic brain injury.

After he'd come home, however, and continued his own ad hoc psilocybin therapy for about six months, Carcillo got another set of scans. "What [doctors] were able to see is, those areas of red may have gone down to blue, or in some cases white, which is consistent with that normal brain pattern," says Wingertzahn, meaning Carcillo's brain was suddenly showing greater connectivity and function. What interested Wingertzahn most, though, was what happened to Carcillo's symptoms, which the former hockey player says have been reduced, on a scale from one to 10, to a number not even on the menu: "Zero."

The reduction of symptoms is what the FDA does care about, says Wingertzahn, who spent 25 years at pharma companies, including Pfizer, getting new drugs to market. He thinks psilocybin-based medicines will be approved in three to five years.

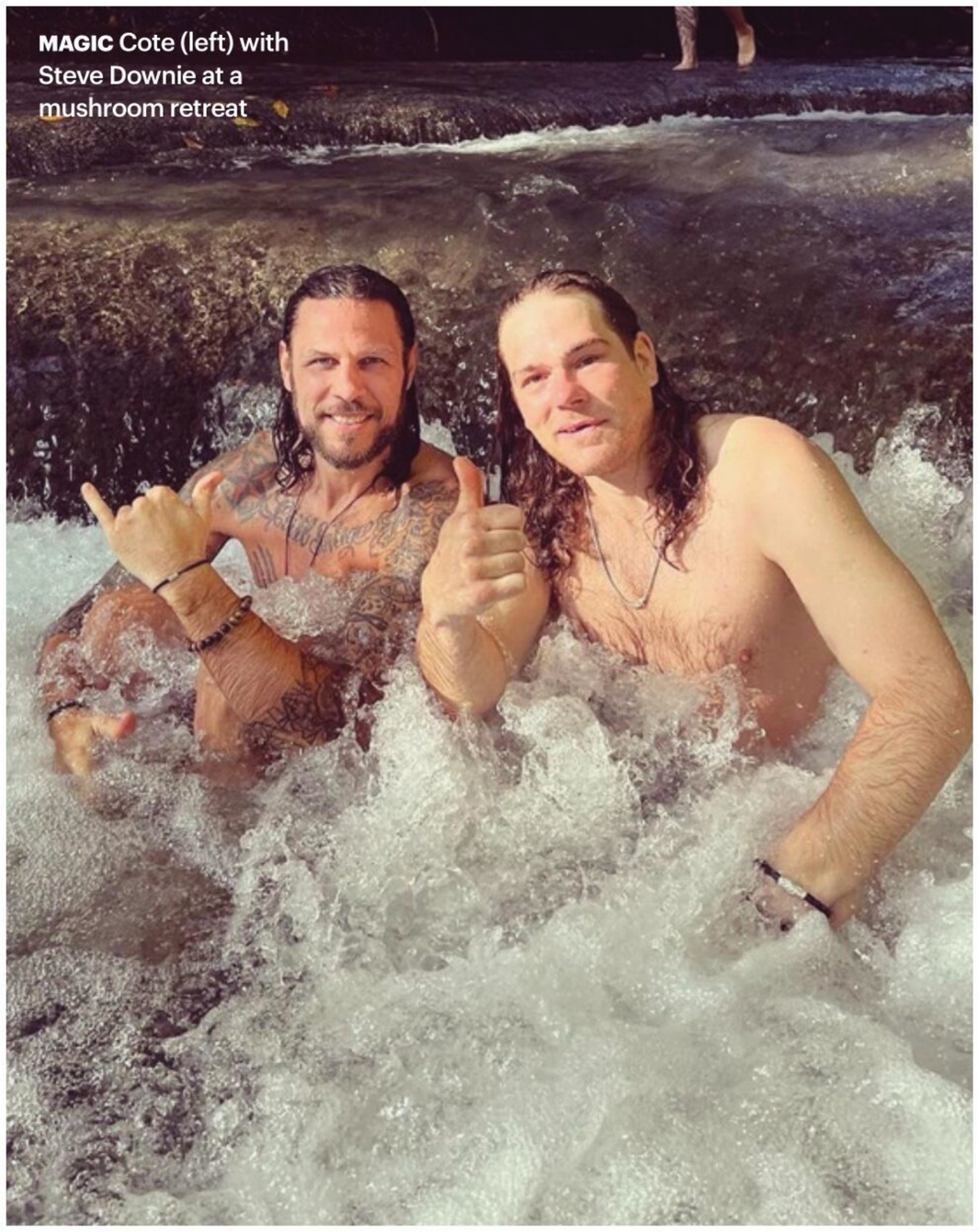
Human trials have shown

FROM TOP: JEFF VINNICK/NHLI/GETTY IMAGES; BRETT CARLSEN/GETTY IMAGES

significant success in the areas of depression, death anxiety, smoking cessation, positive personality changes and more. Not only that, a pair of studies have suggested that psilocybin treats depression at rates at least equal to, and by some measures much better than, today's available meds – along with a whole different class of side effects.

Listed side effects for drugs like Lexapro include nausea, sleepiness, weakness, dizziness, anxiety, trouble sleeping, delayed ejaculation, painful erections, difficulty with orgasms, sweating, shaking, reduced appetite, and dry mouth. Noted side effects of psychedelics, aside from that small number who experience a psychotic break, and the occasional bout of nausea or insomnia, include joy, calm, increased awareness, self-confidence and a sometimes obnoxious desire to tell everybody you meet about your awesome fucking experience.

Carcillo, during a Zoom call, smiles and asks: "Are you interested in something like that?" It's the same question, essentially, Cote has been asking for years – the seemingly obvious answer left hanging in the air.



MAGIC Cote (left) with Steve Downie at a mushroom retreat

"He's by far one of the leading voices in sports around these issues. And the athletes he's brought into Athletes for Care are all very similar. They've run the gauntlet in the physical realm like nobody else"

– Snider

IN THE DAYS before Cote left for Jamaica, a few of the people scheduled to come cancelled, including the former offensive lineman Justin Renfrow.

"I was trying to make a lot of excuses," says Renfrow, who has a lot in common with Cote, having made it to the pros as an undrafted free agent and carved out a difficult career bouncing between NFL squads and the Canadian Football League. "I played football injured since my sophomore year of high school," he says, explaining that the grind slowly took its toll.

The journeyman tackle told Cote he wasn't going to make it to the retreat, then secretly asked the universe for a sign. The night before the scheduled trip, he got one: a text message from Wake, the psilocybin research company, delivered at 11:11, a time his family had always invested with mystical meaning. He felt it was his deceased grandmother encouraging him to go.

Cote's old teammate Downie, meanwhile, said yes to Jamaica, and then complained that he did not have a valid passport, so he would not be able to travel. Cote talked him through that episode. Still, he couldn't be sure either of them would actually get on the plane.

Khara Cartagena, vice president of business development with the Spore Group, one of many start-ups across the country prepping for the Wild West of psychedelic legalisation, was sitting with Cote as he waited to see if Downie and Renfrow would arrive.

"I could see he was distracted," says Cartagena. "He was clear that it meant a lot to him to help these people."

But eventually, after an anxious several minutes, Cote lit up at the appearance of Renfrow. And again when he saw a figure he thought he could recognise at a distance – the height just about right, the shape in silhouette familiar, until finally the man got close enough that Cote could see the trademark missing tooth in his smile: Steve Downie, Cote's old teammate.

"It was all just really beautiful," says Cote. "I shouldn't be surprised. Plant medicine delivers, you know. But it was really maybe even better than I expected."

Both men were moved by their magic-mushroom experiences. Downie teared up after his first dose, and spoke during a subsequent integration session – held to help people process the intense experience – about how his father had died in a car accident while taking him to hockey practice. The ceremony had given Downie an incredible sense of relief.

Perhaps the most powerful moment, though, came when Cote looked at Renfrow deep into the ceremony. Renfrow had spoken to Cote beforehand about his personal uncertainty: should he continue playing in the CFL, or pursue his passion for the YouTube food show he's created, *What's Cooking*, and try to grow it? A hulking man at six feet five and nearly 23 stone, Renfrow was wearing a T-shirt with his initials on it in a circle. Then, methodically, he took it off. Cote felt he was watching a peace settle over the big man as it had once settled over him: a shedding of the skin and the birth of someone new.

Renfrow, in a tearful interview after the trip, confirms Cote's observation: "It felt like my grandma was taking that weight," the pain and stress of playing through all those injuries, he says. "I didn't need to keep going through that." He emerged knowing that he could leave football behind.

Cote, for his part, says that bringing people like Renfrow this kind of existential healing is his calling now, and he marvels at the dichotomy between the "old Riley" and the new. In Flyers-related photos, his eyes are often filled with terror, bestial anger, and sadness. Now, he says, "here I am talking about a flower."

He laughs.

"It's been an incredible journey," he says, "and really, I just want to take as many people with me as possible." ®

COURTESY OF RILEY COTE

Great Stages make for legendary moments

From The Beatles to Beyoncé, Paramore to the Proms – the Royal Albert Hall has played host to some of the world's leading figures in music, dance, sport and politics since it opened its doors in 1871. Today, over 1.7 million visitors enjoy live performances every year, with millions more tuning in online. Just one example of how the UK entertains and inspires audiences from around the world. Join us and see things differently.

GREAT
BRITAIN & NORTHERN IRELAND

Royal Albert Hall

Harry Styles has become a global pop icon. Now, he has his sights set on Hollywood. How does he make all of it look so easy – even when it definitely isn't?

BY BRITTANY SPANOS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMANDA FORDYCE

THE WORLD'S MOST WANTED MAN

On a Friday night in New York, Harry Styles put on a show.

It wasn't just any show; it was the first time he performed his third and soon-to-be-biggest album, *Harry's House*, in its entirety. The crowd that May night covered Long Island's UBS Arena in feathers and glitter and tears – a ritualistic skin shedding of sorts whenever Styles comes to town.

Fans noticed something different about the encore: Styles didn't end with his usual closer, 'Kiwi'; instead, he opted to finish the night with a second performance of his new single 'As It Was', his dance-through-the-tears pandemic reflection on isolation and change. When he played it, the crowd exploded in a way even Styles had never experienced. It left him a bit shaken.

"We came offstage, and I went into my dressing room and just wanted to sit by myself for a minute," he tells me, two months later. "After One Direction, I didn't expect to ever experience anything new. I kind of felt like, 'All right, I've seen how crazy it can get.' And I think there was something about it where I was... not terrified, but I just needed a minute. Because I wasn't sure what it was. Just that the energy felt insane."

At 28, Styles has unlocked a new level of stardom for himself. Years ago, he regularly filled stadiums as a member of One Direction, his former boy band. This spring and summer, he's playing them on his own. 'As It Was' has become his hugest song yet, setting streaming records and topping the charts in more than two dozen countries, including 10 weeks straight in the US. Because he's a star with a largely young, female fan base, many have refused to engage with him as much more than a pretty teen idol. (I don't need to lay out decades of music history to show how wrong of a take that is.) But he can feel the tides change in curious ways. "'As It Was' is definitely the highest volume of men that I would get stopping me to say something about it," he notes. "That feels like a weird comment because it's not like men was the goal. It's just something I noticed."

Before his headlining set at Coachella in April, I caught Harry backstage, surrounded by James Corden, Styles's onstage guest Shania Twain, and his girlfriend, Olivia Wilde. Later, I took in sold-out shows in New York and at Wembley Stadium. The immense love showering Styles was impossible to ignore – you see it in the faces of every fan, whether they've been supporting him for "one year, two years, five years, 12 years", as he says in nearly every end-of-show thank-you speech. Along the way I heard him everywhere, even when I wasn't trying. 'As It Was' played in every cab. 'Watermelon Sugar' soundtracked breakfast. 'Golden' lurked quietly at a London chemist's. 'Late Night Talking' blasted at a Brooklyn bar, leading one man to proclaim, "I like Harry Styles. I can admit it," like it was a radical act of self-acceptance.

And while he may be everywhere in 2022, Styles is, at the moment, literally right in front of me, sitting in an armchair of a hotel business suite in Hamburg, Germany, on a sweaty June afternoon. After a dip in the Irish Sea this morning, he flew into town and is now enjoying a day off in the middle of his first European tour since 2018.

In person, Styles looks more like your best friend's cute, sporty older brother than the gender-bending style icon he's become. He's left the boas and sequin jumpsuits in the dressing room, opting instead for a blue Adidas track jacket, gym shorts, and Gucci trainers. His hair, often described as "tousled", like he's a renegade prince in a romance novel, is clipped back with a hair claw, a signature day-off accessory.

Styles is a kind of millennial anomaly: he plugs his phone in across the room, never once sneaking a glance for a rogue notification. He maintains eye contact as his thoughts unfurl in his often slow drawl. He's a bit more Zen, even stoic, than he once was; that goofy, class-clown energy he exuded when the world first fell in love with him in One Direction 12 years ago has naturally diminished. But he's still as affable and charming as ever, remembering details from small talk we had in all the other cities where I had been (professionally) stalking him, and proving earnestly curious about how I was going to spend my time in Hamburg and how magazine deadlines work. (Back in New York, after surprising fans at a Spotify event for his new album, he asked me my thoughts on David Crosby's most recent album, which he loved.)

"My great uncle lives here," Styles says of Hamburg. "He married a German lady, so I have a German cousin. They always used to come and visit when I was a kid, and the only word in English [the cousin] knew was 'lemonade'. I didn't know if she actually wanted lemonade or was trying to say 'Give me some water, please!'"

Of course it wasn't meant to take him this long to get back to places like Hamburg, where he'll play for more than 50,000 fans tomorrow night at Volksparkstadion, a local football stadium. Love on Tour, the name for his current trek, was supposed to launch in the spring of 2020, a few months after Styles released his second album, *Fine Line*. We all know what happened next.

STYLING BY HARRY LAMBERT FOR BRYANT ARTISTS; STYLIST ASSISTANTS: RYAN WOHLGEMUT AND NAOMI PHILLIPS; FASHION DIRECTION BY ALEX BADIA; PRODUCTION BY JAMES WARREN FOR DMB REPRESENTS; HAIR BY MATT MULHALL FOR STREETERS; GROOMING BY LAURA DOMINIQUE FOR STREETERS; SET DESIGN BY DAVID WHITE FOR STREETERS

PREVIOUS SPREAD

VEST BY **VIVIENNE WESTWOOD**

THIS PAGE

TANK BY **LOEWE**, BRACES, **STYLIST'S OWN**, TROUSERS BY **GUCCI**

VEST AND SKIRT BY
VIVIENNE WESTWOOD,
SHOES BY **ERL**

Styles didn't get to play live again until last autumn, but something funny happened in the interim. While we were bound to our homes, Styles experienced his first number one hit in *Fine Line*'s 'Watermelon Sugar', a tune so sweet it may take a moment to realise he's singing about cunnilingus. Less than a year later, he won his first Grammy for it.

As the pandemic deepened, Styles ended up back in Los Angeles, where he keeps a home, and moved in with three friends. They'd "go for walks, cook dinner, wash the lettuce, all that kind of stuff," he says, until he decided to use his downtime productively and began writing new material. Rick Rubin's Malibu studio, Shangri-La, was available, so Styles moved in with longtime producers and co-writers Kid Harpoon and Tyler Johnson. "We didn't really know what we were going in for," he says. "It just felt like sitting at home doing nothing might feel better if we all move in together and try to make some music." Before they knew it, they were making *Harry's House*, a revelatory statement that happens to be his most radio-friendly album to date. He took inspiration from Haruomi Hosono's 1973 LP, *Hosono House,* which he first heard when he lived in Japan years ago, and treated the songs like they were an internal monologue, traversing a day in his life.

When flying became an option, Styles came home to London. Later, he drove down to Italy in his late stepdad's car with a friend, listening to the jazz CDs left behind. He visited the Trevi Fountain one day, likely wearing his short-lived pandemic moustache, and was greeted with just four other people instead of the usual throngs that surround the historic site: "I felt like every day you'd say, 'Weird time, isn't it?' Then go, 'Yeah, it's fucking insane!'"

He credits his stream of roommates – friends, collaborators – with keeping him together during this time. "I really would've struggled if I'd done the whole thing by myself," he says, mirroring the "*Harry, you're no good alone*" lyric from 'As It Was'. After Italy, Styles visited friends in France, then returned to work, eventually posting up at Real World Studios near Bath. By the time he set off across the US to finally tour behind *Fine Line* last autumn, *Harry's House* was secretly finished.

Now, besides the unavoidable singles and the victory-lap world tour, there are other indicators of next-level stardom: his skincare, nail polish and clothing line called Pleasing and a fashion collection with Gucci, not to mention his flourishing movie career. He's starring in the psychological thriller *Don't Worry Darling* and in the intimate drama *My Policeman,* and he's nabbed a deal with Marvel Studios to play Eros in at least one of the *Eternals* films. "Everything in my life has felt like a bonus since *X-Factor*," he says, referring to the singing competition that led directly to One Direction. "Get on TV and sing. I never expected and never thought that would happen."

But today, in a Hamburg hotel, Styles is still trying to make sense of it all. He thinks hard about love, shame, honesty and the importance of kindness and therapy. And he worries. He worries about how he can be one of the biggest pop stars in the world, the kind who can be everything for his fans while also being a great son, brother, friend and partner to the people standing beside him. As everything gets bigger, Styles imagines a life that is smaller. How does the world's most wanted man save the best parts for himself?

WHEN STYLES PLAYED TWO sold-out shows at Wembley Stadium in June, the first thing he did after stepping offstage each night was take a shower. The post-show shower has become a ritual: a hygienic necessity, sure, but also a crucial moment of clarity and reflection. He washes away the screams full of love and desire to just be in his presence. Anyone would be overwhelmed by that. "It's really unnatural to stand in front of that many people and have that experience," he says. "Washing it off, you're just a naked person, in your most vulnerable, human form. Just like a naked baby, basically."

Those post-Wembley showers were especially gratifying. When One Direction, which Styles casually refers to as "the band", played the stadium in 2014, he ended up with tonsillitis on the day of the show. "I was miserable," he recalls. "We played the first one, and I remember I came off, got in the car, and just started crying because I was so disappointed."

Styles's solo shows at Wembley were a reunion of sorts: he had friends and family from all parts of his life and career in the audience on both nights. His mum, Anne Twist, sister Gemma, friends and his team all danced in the stands next to Wilde and her two young children. Even former bandmate Niall Horan swung by, smiling through 'What Makes You Beautiful'.

As he's become one of the world's biggest pop stars, Styles's need for privacy – for keeping that "naked baby" self out of the public eye – seems to have grown. Secrecy has helped to fend off constant questions about his sex life, the kind that were tossed his way as soon as he was of legal age.

In the past couple of years, he started to go to therapy more routinely. "I committed to doing it once a week," he explains. "I felt like I exercise every day and take care of my body, so why wouldn't I do that with my mind?"

Through it, he started to process parts of himself he hadn't figured out before. "So many of your emotions are so foreign before you start analysing them properly. I like to really lean into [an emotion] and look at it in the face. Not like, 'I don't want to feel like this,' but more like, 'What is it that makes me feel this way?'"

"'AS IT WAS' IS DEFINITELY THE HIGHEST VOLUME OF MEN THAT I WOULD GET STOPPING ME TO SAY SOMETHING ABOUT IT"

One feeling he needed to shed was shame, the kind of shame that comes from having your sex life scrutinised while you're still just trying to make sense of it. Over the years, he learned to stop apologising for it. He learned he could be vulnerable in private while still protecting it from the public.

Sometimes, though, he worried he was a "hypocrite" for being so closed off. His shows have become empowering safe spaces for his fans, so many of whom want to share who they are with him. Onstage, he's helped people come out to their parents and facilitated everything from marriage proposals to gender reveals. Separating his personal life from his public one hasn't been a choice he takes lightly. "When I'm working, I work really hard, and I think I'm really professional," he says. "Then when I'm not, I'm not. I'd like to think I'm open, and probably quite stubborn, too, and willing to be vulnerable. I can be selfish sometimes, but I'd like to think that I'm a caring person."

He's found a vague balance through compartmentalisation. "I've never talked about my life away from work publicly and found that it's benefited me positively," he explains, perhaps preemptively. "There's always going to be a version of a narrative, and I think I just decided I wasn't going to spend the time trying to correct it or redirect it in some way."

Drawing the curtain over his life has only made everyone who's not behind it more curious. His sexuality, for example, has been a topic of near-obsession for years. He has embraced gender fluidity in his fashion, like Mick Jagger and David Bowie before him, and has repeatedly pointed out how backward it feels to require labels and boxes for everyone's identity. Critics of his approach have accused him of "queerbaiting" or profiting off queer aesthetics without explicitly claiming the community. Defenders feel it's unfair to force anyone to label themselves as one thing in order to validate their gender or creative expression.

Styles, without prompting, points out how silly he finds some of the arguments about how he may identify to be: "Sometimes people say, 'You've only publicly been with women,' and I don't think I've publicly been with anyone. If someone takes a picture of you with someone, it doesn't mean you're choosing to have a public relationship or something."

Of late, this can be contested. While he is everywhere, so is Olivia Wilde. The pair met on the set of *Don't Worry Darling*, which she directed (more on that in a moment), then made a splash when paparazzi snapped them holding hands at his manager and close friend Jeffrey Azoff's wedding in January 2021.

Wilde and Styles have said little about the relationship, and rumours have filled the space. The few months' difference between the announcement of her separation from longtime partner Jason Sudeikis and Styles and Wilde's 'debut' (of sorts) as a couple has created recurring gossip cycles about infidelity. Anonymous tweeters acted appalled at their age difference (as if a 28-year-old man dating a 38-year-old woman isn't completely normal) and criticised the director-actor dating dynamic (as if there isn't a long history of beloved Hollywood couples meeting the same way). Leading up to the film's release, blind items created yet another gossip cycle, alleging Wilde and Styles's relationship led to tension between the director and lead actress Florence Pugh. (Pugh and Wilde declined to comment on the rumours.)

TOP BY **BOTTER**, SHORTS BY **JW ANDERSON**, SHOES BY **ERL**

More intense and jarring was a corner of Styles's fandom that has made fun of Wilde's dancing or made lengthy Twitter threads and TikTok videos cancelling her for bad or insensitive jokes made a decade ago. If Styles is already held up to a high standard, his potential partners are held to an unreachable one for some of his fans.

Styles is not the most online person – he uses Instagram to look at plants and architecture posts, has never had the TikTok app, and calls Twitter "a shitstorm of people trying to be awful to people" – but he's still aware of how those small, toxic corners of the internet are treating the people closest to him. "That obviously doesn't make me feel good," he says, carefully. It's a tightrope he's treading in discussing this. He wants to – and does! – see the good in his fans, but there's no denying that like every large online community, this one has a faction that runs on hate and anonymity.

Even with the boundaries he's set between his public and private lives, sometimes "other people blur the lines for you", he says. There's a conversation he has to have early in a relationship, no matter how weird or premature it may feel. "Can you imagine," he says, "going on a second date with someone and being like, 'OK, there's this corner of the thing, and they're going to say this, and it's going to be really crazy, and they're going to be really mean, and it's not real.... But anyway, what do you want to eat?'"

While Styles takes comfort in knowing his whole fandom is not like that, he still wonders about how to respond when the noise gets too loud. "It's obviously a difficult feeling to feel like being close to me means you're at the ransom of a corner of Twitter or something," he says. "I just wanted to sing. I didn't want to get into it if I was going to hurt people like that."

When asked about her experience with his fans, Wilde is diplomatic. Like Styles, she believes in what they stand for as a collective, calling them "deeply loving people" who have fostered an accepting community. "What I don't understand about the cruelty you're referencing is that that kind of toxic negativity is the antithesis of Harry, and everything he puts out there," she tells me. "I don't personally believe the hateful energy defines his fan base at all. The majority of them are true champions of kindness."

STYLES BECAME A LEADING MAN when he was four years old, starring in a play called *Barney the Church Man*. Later, he transformed into Buzz Lightyear in a production of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* "because Buzz Lightyear was in the toy shop for some reason". His other early theatre credits include: Razamatazz in *Bugsy Malone* ("the band leader") and the Elvis-inspired Pharaoh in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. (He would later audition for Baz Luhrmann's *Elvis*, but was deemed too iconic by the director.)

Other than that, acting wasn't really part of his life plan. He liked it, but he found a new rush when he started performing with his band White Eskimo. When they debuted at – and won – a Battle of the Bands competition, it was the first time he felt "the switch": his teachers looking up at him, instead of vice versa. "I think I was just a show-off," he says, with a hint of cheekiness. "I say that like it's past tense."

But as Styles was preparing the release of his solo debut in 2017, he took his first foray back into acting, with a supporting role in Christopher Nolan's war epic, *Dunkirk*. (The director said he had no idea how famous Styles was when he cast him.) By the time Marvel recruited him to become Eros, director Chloé Zhao had no one else *but* Styles in mind for the role. Thanos's more heroic brother is portrayed in the comics as an intergalactic playboy of sorts, with superhuman strength and the ability to control people's emotions (a fitting role for the planet's hottest pop star). MCU boss Kevin Feige recently teased more from Styles, though so far, his only appearance has been the *Eternals*' post-credits scene, alongside the Patton Oswalt-voiced Pip. "It'd be funny if that was it, wouldn't it?" he jokes of his cameo.

Styles's role in *Dunkirk* grabbed Wilde's attention as she was beginning to map out *Don't Worry Darling*. He was an early contender for the role of Jack, a charming but secretive husband to Florence Pugh's increasingly troubled Alice. And Styles had plenty of reasons to be interested in *Don't Worry Darling*. Wilde's second feature film as a director reportedly started a bidding war among 18 studios, following the success of her directorial debut, *Booksmart*.

> **"EVERYTHING IN MY LIFE HAS FELT LIKE A BONUS SINCE *X-FACTOR*. GET ON TV AND SING. I NEVER EXPECTED AND NEVER THOUGHT THAT WOULD HAPPEN"**

Pre-pandemic talks between Styles and the *Darling* team didn't make it far; he was, after all, due on a global tour for most of 2020. Instead, Shia LaBeouf won the role, but by the end of that summer, Wilde had reportedly booted the actor for poor on-set behaviour.

"I'd wanted to act again," Styles says. He spent a lot of the pandemic watching movies with his quarantine set of friends and collaborators: he rescreened favourites like the 2012 Belgian drama *The Broken Circle Breakdown*. Some nights, he and his friends would put a bunch of titles in a hat and choose. ("There was a couple different tastes in the house, so it was between, like, *Parasite* and *Coyote Ugly*.")

Styles was announced as LaBeouf's replacement a month before filming began. He proved perfect for the role of Jack, who's brought Alice to the remote, fictional American town of Victory to work on a secret project the men at the company won't tell their wives about. Jack's become a star employee and is desperate for his boss's approval. "We were looking for someone with innate warmth and palpable charm," Wilde says. "The entire story depended on the audience believing in Jack."

Styles shot *Don't Worry Darling* between September 2020 and February 2021 in LA and Palm Springs. Those months were the longest Styles had lived in one place in 11 years. He thought about going completely off the grid while making it: maybe get a flip phone, stop making music. "The reality is you get there on the first day and wait around for 75 per cent of it," he says. "And it's like, 'Actually, I'm going to text my mate.'"

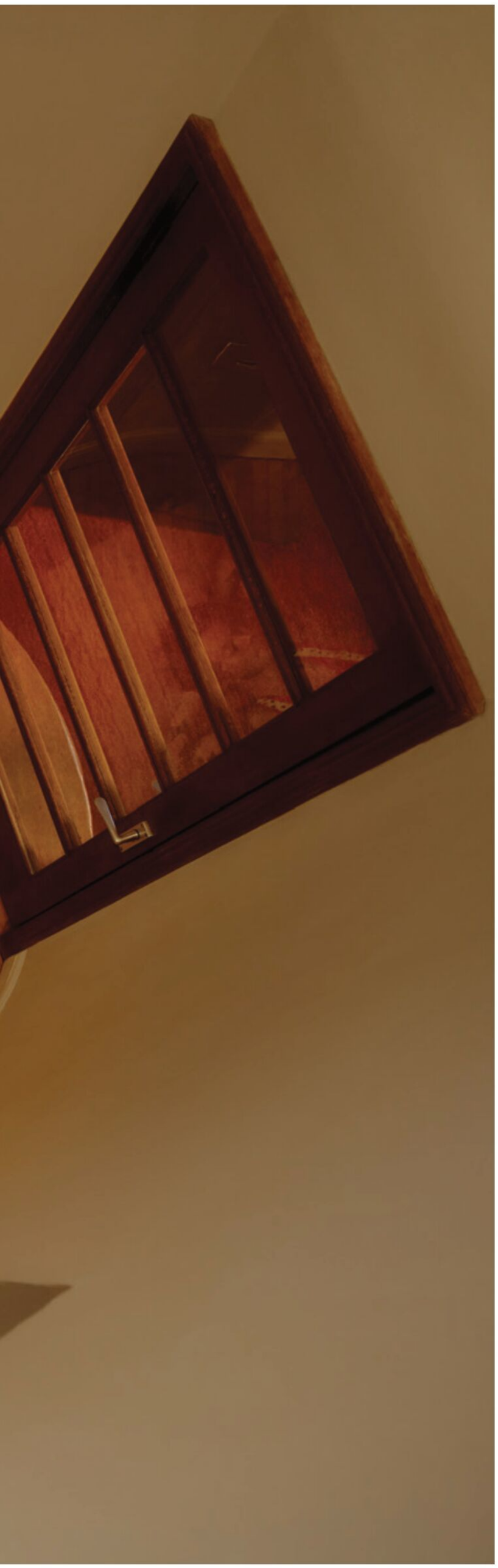
At the start, he was understandably anxious about taking on such a large role alongside stars like Pugh, Chris Pine, Gemma Chan and Nick Kroll. "In music, there's such an immediate response to what you do. You finish a song and people clap," he says. "When you're filming and they say 'Cut,' there's maybe part of you that expects everyone to start clapping, [but] they don't. Everyone, obviously, goes back to doing their jobs, and you're like, 'Oh, shit, was it that bad?'" (Being an actor reminded him of session musicians: "You get called in to do your bit, and then someone else puts it all together and makes it.")

The risk may pay off: he and Pugh are already getting awards-season buzz. Wilde says one moment "left us all in tears" – Jack's promotion scene during a big company gala. "It's a strange scene, full of fascist references, and a disturbing amount of male rage," Wilde says. "The scene called for him to stand onstage with Frank (Chris Pine) and chant their creepy slogan, 'Whose world is it? Ours!' over and over again. Dark as hell. But Harry took it to another level. He was so fully in the moment, he began screaming the lines to the crowd, in this primal roar, that was way more intense than anything we expected from the scene."

According to Wilde, Pine backed away, understanding this was Harry's moment. "The camera operator followed him as he paced around the stage like a kind of wild animal," Wilde remembers. "We were all gobsmacked at the monitor. I think even Harry was surprised by it. Those are the best moments for an actor – when you're completely outside your body."

HARRY STYLES

TANK BY **LOEWE**. BRACES, **STYLIST'S OWN**, TROUSERS BY **GUCCI**



Within weeks, Styles went from the set of *Darling* to shooting the more intimate *My Policeman*. He had read the script the year prior, moved by the story enough to have contacted director Michael Grandage and request a meeting. Styles showed up with every line memorised.

Styles plays Tom, a policeman who develops feelings for a museum curator named Patrick (David Dawson). Set in the 50s, when it was still illegal to be in a same-sex relationship in the UK, the pair move in secret while Tom pursues a marriage with a schoolteacher named Marion (Emma Corrin). The film shifts between the past and the present, when the three reunite under dire circumstances. "It's obviously pretty unfathomable now to think, 'Oh, you couldn't be gay. That was illegal,'" Styles says. "I think everyone, including myself, has your own journey with figuring out sexuality and getting more comfortable with it." To him, *My Policeman* is a very human story. "It's not like, 'This is a gay story about these guys being gay.' It's about love and about wasted time to me."

According to Styles, Grandage wanted to highlight what sex is really like between two men in the scenes between Tom and Patrick. "So much of gay sex in film is two guys going at it, and it kind of removes the tenderness from it," Styles continues. "There will be, I would imagine, some people who watch it who were very much alive during this time when it was illegal to be gay, and [Michael] wanted to show that it's tender and loving and sensitive."

Darling and *Policeman* make their big premieres at prestigious film festivals in Venice and Toronto late this summer, but Styles isn't sure his pivot to the silver screen will be permanent. "I don't imagine I'd do a movie for a while," he says. There are rumours about how many Marvel movies he's signed on for and other franchises he might be secretly in talks to do. (In response to a rumour he'll be starring in a future *Star Wars* series, he says, "That's the first I've heard of that. I'd imagine... false.")

He doesn't rule out taking on new roles. "I think there'll be a time again when I'll crave it," he says. "But when you're making music, something's happening. It feels really creative, and it feeds stuff. A large part of acting is the doing-nothing, waiting thing. Which if that's the worst part, then it's a pretty good job. But I don't find that section of it to be that fulfilling. I like doing it in the moment, but I don't think I'll do it a lot."

LIKE A TRUE tousled-haired prince, Styles invites me to attend a concert with him by the philharmonic in Hamburg, eight hours before his own show.

On past tours, he says, "I was getting to a lot of cities and feeling like 'I've been here six times and I've never seen any of it.'" This tour, he's been taking in a lot of architecture. "It's something I can do on my own, just sit somewhere and look at stuff," he says.

Studying the finer points of buildings fits the regimented, disciplined and distinctly grown-up tour life he's created. Styles has found himself enamoured with routine on the road: 10 hours of sleep a night, IV injections pumping him with nutrients and vitamins, a strict acid-reflux-conscious diet

"EVERYONE, INCLUDING MYSELF, HAS YOUR OWN JOURNEY WITH FIGURING OUT SEXUALITY AND GETTING MORE COMFORTABLE WITH IT"

that cuts out coffee, alcohol and certain foods that affect the throat 50,000 fans are depending on. Last night, he slept with two humidifiers that apparently made it look like he was stepping out of a steam room when he opened his hotel-room door.

The Elbphilharmonie Hamburg – "Elphi" for short – is a striking structure, looking something like a gorgeous sail. Styles is wearing the same outfit as when I met him in the hotel the day before, only with shorts swapped out for pinstripe pants and a surgical mask covering his face. He and I are both late and can't be let into the show until intermission, so instead we comb through the backstage hallways and elevators to see rooms built for incredible acoustics and sweeping views of Hamburg. He marvels at all of it. In a temperature-controlled room full of pianos, he asks our tour guide which is the best ("Is there a shining star?") before sitting down at one and playing for a couple of dreamy, Beatlesque minutes. (He'd mentioned earlier that he spent last summer playing piano every day with his morning

coffee.) He has questions about panelling. And like a true tourist, he takes pictures of everything.

The first time I ever met Styles was a lot like this. On his first headlining tour, in San Francisco in 2017, I went backstage to interview Kid Harpoon. Styles stumbled into the room where I was waiting, strolling around less like a headliner with fans lined up around the block and more like the lighting guy. Here was someone who is inexplicably difficult to casually enjoy (you watch one video of One Direction's funniest interview moments on YouTube and suddenly you're contemplating how many of their cardboard cutouts you can fit in your dorm) acting so *casually*. He greeted me then like an old friend, not someone who was still refusing to let go of a One Direction keychain at the time. He asked me how I had been, what I was up to in San Francisco, and if I was excited for the show. Of course I remember every second of it.

Styles has a gift for making those in his presence feel seen. Just ask fans who bump into him on walks through Central Park or Hampstead Heath, then detail those moments as if they had met the pope (granted, the pope could never pull off a hair claw).

Before the second half of the concert at the Elphi, the crowd mingles and grabs drinks. As we walk through, Styles goes unnoticed. (The mask helps.) It's funny to watch one of the world's biggest pop stars move through space with such ease, as if he's blissfully unaware of how well-known he is.

"If you make your life about the fact that you can't go anywhere and everything has to be a big deal, then that's what your life becomes," he says. "Now, in London, I walk everywhere. It's hard to stumble across things and restaurants and places and stuff if you're just driving everywhere, and it's just not that fun."

Styles outlines his upcoming months for me: in August, after he wraps his European tour in Lisbon, he'll go on holiday with some friends, maybe catch up on the *Love Island* season he was "gutted" to miss, or see if *The Bear* is as good as everyone tells him it is. The next leg of his tour includes stops in LA, New York, Austin and Chicago as extended residencies, a decision that meets his personal need for a less strenuous touring schedule and a professional need to be able to attend film festivals and rent studios to write and record music for his fourth album. "I'm always writing," he says. He and his collaborators are already throwing around ideas. "I think all of us are so excited to get back to it, which feels insane because we've just put an album out."

More than ever, he is thinking about the future. He wants to take meaningful time off at some point – from touring at least, he's always writing – and ensure he's a more present figure for his family and friends. In turn, he's learned to define what real love looks like to him. "The fantasy, or the vision, or the version of you that people can build you up to be feels like a person that isn't flawed," he explains. "What I value the most from my friends is I feel like I'm constantly reminded that it's OK to be flawed. I think I'm pretty messy and make mistakes sometimes. I think that's the most loving thing: you can see someone's imperfections, and it's not [that you] love them in spite of that, but it's [that you] love them with that."

"WHAT I VALUE THE MOST FROM MY FRIENDS IS I'M REMINDED THAT IT'S OK TO BE FLAWED. I'M PRETTY MESSY AND MAKE MISTAKES SOMETIMES"

He's thinking about what it would be like if he had children one day: "Well, if I have kids at some point, I will encourage them to be themselves and be vulnerable and share."

He's thinking about what he wants to say, too. Styles admits he was uninterested in politics as a teenager, oblivious to things that didn't personally affect him. But as he grew more famous, he worried about that, too. "I took a massive look at myself," he says, "and was like, 'Oh, I don't do enough... or anything." When conversations around anti-Blackness and inaction reached a fever pitch in 2020, Styles marched in the streets and read books like *How to Be an Antiracist,* by Ibram X. Kendi, and *The Will to Change,* by bell hooks. He started thinking about racial and gender equity, especially as someone who employs many people on the road. "Pretending as a white person you don't get a head start just isn't true," he says.

We were hanging out right after *Roe v. Wade* had been overturned in America. "I can't begin to imagine how terrifying it is to be a woman in America at the moment," he says. He'll grab a fan's sign that reads "My Body, My Choice" at the Hamburg show, displaying it proudly onstage. There's an energy in the crowds that fills him with careful optimism. "I feel lucky to see a group of people, even just on this tour, who come together in a way," he says. "I think that group of people is so much less afraid of opening the wound, talking about it, and doing the work, than the generation before us."

As we wait for the philharmonic's packed show to restart, I notice a few young girls with their families in the audience and ask Styles what he thinks the crossover between this crowd and his show tonight will be. He looks around at the mostly older faces and goes, "Less than one per cent... I know I'll be at both."

Styles watches the orchestra studiously. When the conductor leaves and then returns to a standing ovation, Styles whispers, "He's about to play his big hit." Even when he's not peacocking in front of 50,000, he's still trying to entertain the one person he's with.

We walk out before the crowd fully disperses. Styles lingers a second to take some photos of the room before he heads out to get ready for his concert, where he'll bounce around the stage, lifted by the wails of young fans who have been waiting years for this moment.

His fans will linger tonight, too, crowding in the hundreds outside Volksparkstadion. They'll take photos of their outfits, their tear- and sweat-stained glittery faces, the piles of abandoned boa feathers. They'll play his big hits back to him, holding a phone-light vigil as they sing One Direction's 'Night Changes' or the *Fine Line* ballad 'Falling'. As the city echoes as much of him as it can take, he'll probably be washing it all away. ®

TOPS, SHORTS AND SHOES BY **ERL**, TIGHTS BY **CHARLES DE VILMORIN**

Funny Girl

Comedian Diane Morgan has made a lasting impression on British TV. From her characters Philomena Cunk to Mandy, she's one of the leading ladies bringing laughter to the small screen. In this interview, she discusses Charlie Brooker, her miserable stand-up and why there are far too many police dramas

By **Hannah Ewens**
Photography by **Dean Ryan McDaid**
Styling by **Joseph Kocharian**

THE COMEDIAN'S EYES are wide, mouth contorted, as she answers a telephone that never rang. 'I Will Survive' by Diana Ross fills the room. "Who is it?" Diane Morgan says into the unplugged retro device. The people around her — a stylist, photographer, editor, makeup artist — crack jokes about who is on the other end. Morgan laughs raucously, as though everyone is as funny as she is (they're not).

Morgan, 46, grew up in Bolton with a physiotherapist father and a mum who raised her and her older brother. The family loved watching comedy together, which nurtured her interest in it. "I remember one exercise at primary school was to write down everything we watched in a week and everything I watched was comedy," she remembers. "There was no *Newsround* or *Blue Peter*. It was all sitcom after sitcom, a sketch show, a comedy film."

You'll recognise Morgan's face from TV, even if you don't know her name. She wrote, directed and starred in *Mandy*, a short, snappy sitcom about an inept, curious woman who can't hold down a job. She had a key part in *Motherland*, a sitcom about the trials of motherhood, and *After Life*, Ricky Gervais's popular Netflix show. But for many British comedy viewers, it is her role as Philomena Cunk, Charlie Brooker's fictional BBC presenter, that made her one to watch.

When she auditioned for the part, she asked if she could try out with an exaggerated take on her own Bolton accent, in addition to the posh one Brooker had envisioned. Brooker and his team loved this version, reflective of the strange and offbeat feel that Morgan brings to every role. Her work as Cunk expanded from a small bit part on *Weekly Wipe* to her own mockumentary series which sees the presenter attacking various topics — Shakespeare, Britain, Christmas — and somehow getting to the heart of the issue with blunt, silly ignorance.

It's odd, Morgan thinks, that the BBC factual programming and documentary style tics that Cunk sends up are still used today. "I assumed that after Cunk came, everyone would then stop doing those tropes. But they don't. You still get Cunk-like interviews, too. It's really weird," she says. Her favourite part of playing that role is engaging stuffy academic experts on the topic of the episode. There are plenty of these humorous sketches throughout the upcoming *Cunk on Earth*, a series about humanity that tackles who we are, how we got here and, far more crucially, what was the point?

DIANE WEARS TOP AND SKIRT, BOTH BY ROTATE AT END., BOOTS BY VERSACE, NECKLACE, BRACELET AND EARRINGS, ALL BY VAN CLEEF & ARPELS, RING (THROUGHOUT), DIANE'S OWN

The experts who made it onto *Earth* presumably didn't know who you were and that they were being stitched up?

When we first started doing [Cunk], obviously nobody knew. They'd sign a release form and not know what the show was. Then they tend to get quite angry because you're trampling all over their favourite topic. And then there was a point where some people started to know because their sons or daughters would go, "Oh, Cunk, you've got to do it." I think a lot of experts just don't watch television. They just don't. They read books. So, they literally don't know what they're in for. And they certainly don't know what questions they're gonna get. You lull them into a false sense of security for ages because those interviews, each one is well over an hour long and cut down to three minutes. You can really choose the choice bits.

How do you prep for those interviews then? Are they semi-scripted?

I've got a list of questions, but you just don't know where the conversation is gonna go. You have to improvise it, because they might start talking about something else. It's so freeing. If you were given free rein to be as thick as you liked and as rude as you'd liked and as bored as you liked... It's just like, "None of it's my fault, I've been paid to do this." What are they gonna do? Storm off? That would just make great TV.

What's the angriest someone's been?

There was a guy early on. Was it [Cunk on] Churchill? He really looked angry. Then production stopped the interview and said, "Oh, do you mind not being so aggressive with Philomena?" He really looked like he was gonna grab my throat. I was sort of thinking, 'I hope he does because that'll make great TV if someone throttles Philomena.' You get weirdly sort of fearless when you do it because you can't do anything wrong. You can yawn in people's faces; you can flick them the Vs mid-interview.

Or you can ask them about anal bleaching, as you do in the new series.

And he hadn't heard of anal bleaching, didn't know it's a thing.

He clearly hadn't watched the film *Bridesmaids*.

Yeah! But that's experts for you. They don't watch TV and they don't have their own anus bleached.

When you were younger you used to watch comedy with your family. What were your favourite shows?

I watched *all* comedy. Stuff that my dad would introduce me to: *Hancock's Half Hour*, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore [*Not Only... But Also*]. I think it was just all going in and I was absorbing it. It was prized in our house to be as funny as possible. You could fail all your exams as long as you were funny. I think they wanted us to be happy, basically. And it's a good job because I'm just not academic.

I was always obsessed with comedy. You have to be. If you're not, don't bother going into it. I did drama school then stand-up for nearly 10 years. And the first couple of years of stand-up, I was still doing jobs alongside and not being paid for stand-up. You've got to be in it for the long haul.

What was the feel of your stand-up? I couldn't see any clips online.

My vibe was not wearing makeup, make my hair look shit and just tell everyone how awful my life was in a very deadpan way. It was all about the terrible jobs and how awful it is getting older. And death. I very quickly started to earn money. I couldn't believe that. After years of doing everything: telesales and dental nursing and packing worming tablets.

You were 30 when you started stand-up. What else were you doing in your 20s?

I was desperate to get into drama school and tried three times to get in. On the third year, I finally got in. Maxine Peake, who's a friend of mine, she was doing the auditions with me as well. It's really weird looking back at those times now, thinking, 'Why wasn't anyone taking her?' After drama school, I just couldn't get arrested. I was doing shitty jobs. I was in some telesales job. I'd have to ring up and ask people if they were happy with their accountant and people would often be rude to me. "I got out of the bath to answer this call." And the office would laugh. My boss was like, "Seriously, you should do stand-up." Thirty was looming and I thought, 'I've really got to pull my finger out, I can't be doing this at 55.' During your 20s you don't realise that time's skipping on. I did one of those stand-up courses and that's when everything started to change.

But with stand-up, towards the end, I didn't care if I did well, or if I didn't do well. I didn't feel anything any more. Luckily, I just started to get into TV with auditions for Cunk and other bits.

Why did you fall out of love with stand-up?

I got completely numb to it, and I never wanted to do, like, an hour of stand-up in Edinburgh. That's the natural progression as a stand-up: you build up a 20-minute set and then you do an hour in Edinburgh. I can't think of anything worse than doing an hour of stand-up, especially if you're dying. The thought of being five minutes in, the

"I was always obsessed with comedy. You have to be. If you're not, don't bother going into it"

DIANE WEARS DRESS BY THE ATTICO AT MYTHERESA, EARRINGS, VINTAGE CHANEL AT SUSAN CAPLAN VINTAGE JEWELLERY, RINGS BY SUSAN CAPLAN

audience not being with you. They're looking at their phones and chatting.

Are you glad you got to do those tedious jobs like telesales?

Yeah. Because then you know what people have to put up with and why comedy is so important to them. When I was growing up and I got depressed or upset, I'd always turn to comedy as a comforting thing. It's nice now to think that your comedy might make them feel a tiny bit better. That sounds so wanky, but it's true. I know how it made me feel like I'm not alone in this terrible world.

When you're happy you can be amused and amusing in a self-sustaining way. If I'm miserable, I gravitate towards very depressing comedy.

Yes — if someone's having a great life, what's funny about that? Nothing. You're young and good-looking and everything's well for you. That's why I never liked *Friends*. I just thought, 'What am I laughing at here? Everything's fine for them. There's no jeopardy. You're having a lovely time, look at you, you're all models living in a house together.' *Oh!* [groans]

While you were doing stand-up, did anyone notice you that ended up having an impact on your career?

Charlie Brooker. There are certain people that make a really big difference in your career, looking back. You think, 'Oh, if that person hadn't seen me....' I don't think I'd be where I am today if it wasn't for him.

Did you realise at the time that him casting you as Cunk was going to be a pivotal moment?

No, because I knew that people, especially men, get really obsessed with Charlie Brooker. With his show, even if they change a tiny bit of it, the men get really angry. "Are you changing it? Where's Charlie? We want more Charlie." And so, when I did it, I was warned that on Twitter and stuff, there might be a backlash. They might not like you because you're not Charlie. So be prepared.

As in, they might say, "Well he's writing it, why can't he just be performing it?"

Yes: "I just want Charlie!" So I was aware of that. But then people were lovely. I felt relieved that I got away with it because I was only doing a tiny little three-minute section at first and it grew.

***Motherland* was the next big stepping stone.**

I did a self-tape when I was on holiday. And I thought, 'This will go nowhere.' I couldn't

DIANE WEARS JUMPSUIT BY HALPERN, NECKLACE AND EARRINGS BY VINTAGE CHANEL AT SUSAN CAPLAN VINTAGE JEWELLERY

upload it, and I thought, 'I might just go to the beach, sack this off.' But I persevered and sent the tape. Apparently, they'd been looking for someone to play Liz for a while and found it a difficult part to cast. Mothers love that show. I'm accosted in the street on a daily basis by mums who are like, "Oh my God, thank God for *Motherland*, we really needed it. I recognised all the characters."

Women, whether they have kids or not, have this voracious appetite for art and culture that shows the reality of motherhood.

Because there's not much like that, I don't think. Before [*Motherland*] on TV it was, "Awww, aren't kids cute?" This was like, "Kids have ruined our lives." People being really fucked off with kids and their lives and how awful it is. There isn't another show that deals with that. And I think, again, it's a comfort thing. It's like, 'Oh, thank God, someone else is going through what I'm going through.'

Around the time of promoting *Motherland*, you said that you don't want kids because you don't see any benefits. That's hilarious. Did you get backlash from that?

I didn't because some women don't want kids. It shouldn't be a big deal especially in this age. I've never wanted them. Never for a split second. But if you do — great, good for you. I think some people are wary of bringing up the kids thing if they know you've not got kids because they think, 'Oh, maybe you want them and you can't have them.' Like, 'What if I mention kids and you suddenly burst out crying or something?' When people have kids, they suddenly disappear off, don't they? Me and my partner Ben [Caudell, BBC comedy producer] have got friends now who also don't have kids. And we all hang out together. Enjoying our lives!

Was there a point where your friends disappeared to reproduce?

Dispersed. It happened gradually from early 30s. People start dropping off. You think, 'Where did Sam and John go? Oh, they've got kids. They don't go out any more.' Or, you know, they're just haggard, basically, they're tired. And they'll emerge again 10 years later. Get a rescue dog. We don't need more kids in the world. There's enough.

How did you come up with *Mandy*'s character?

She's based on a lot of women that I saw growing up in Manchester, like an amalgam of women. The mouth was a woman I know, it made her look a bit mad. I added the walk just trying to make the crew laugh. Basically, I walked into shot like that one day and then of course, you're locked in and that's the character's walk for the rest of the series. It was really hurting my back.

Do you enjoy writing on your own more than writing with other people?

No, I think I'd rather write with other people. It's nice to a certain extent. You get to a point where you're like, "I can't think of an ending here. Can you think of an ending?" *Mandy* was only 15 minutes, though. It's not like I'm trying to write a novel or anything, that'd be really difficult. Or *Succession*.

Who were you showing *Mandy* to in its earliest form?

It was like, 10 years before that. I'd been doing it with [comedian] Michael Spicer. I kept laughing at things that he wrote on Twitter and we got into a conversation and then met up to do some improv because he likes doing character stuff as well. We've got this old tape of us, me dressed as Mandy and him trying out some character. It's really sweet.

Did *Mandy* end up exactly as you wanted it? My favourite thing about it is its weird mood. It's unsettling and strange.

Yes. I wanted it to be a bit unsettling. A bit like *The Young Ones*. It's a mad world of its own. I didn't want to do just a traditional sitcom. And with 15 minutes, it's sort of difficult to do a traditional sitcom anyway. It's more like a cartoon, but a weird, unsettling cartoon — like a nightmare, really.

Where do you see your career going?

I don't know. Now that I've done *Inside No. 9*, I feel I can just kill myself. There's nothing else like it. What have I got to look forward to now? Nothing. Because I enjoyed working on that so much — they care about it so much, even down to what hat a character will wear. They're so passionate about it. What could I possibly do next? I am trying to write something else that I won't tell you about because I'm terrible at pitching ideas. I start to think, 'Oh, God, maybe it's a shitty idea.' I'd rather just write it and go *there*. I throw it into a room and run off before I see their reaction.

DIANE WEARS DRESS, SHOES AND EARRINGS, ALL BY MOSCHINO, NECKLACE, BRACELET AND LARGE RING, ALL BY CARTIER

It's a pilot you're writing, though. Is it comedy?

Yeah, I don't think I could write out-and-out drama. It's...

...like comedy, but more boring?

That's a great way of putting it. That's what I think, too.

Are you writing alone?

If [someone] says they'd like to commission a series, I'll get someone else to write it with me. It's just so much more fun that way because then you can spend the first hour gossiping about people you hate.

Would you ever do dramatic acting?

Absolutely. I've been offered stuff, but often policewomen. And I think there's too many shows with police in. If you like police, you're in luck. It's just everywhere. Kiddy's been murdered, police are there.

"Now that I've done *Inside No. 9*, I feel I can just kill myself. There's nothing else like it"

Kids again. Kids and police.

No, thank you. If someone can think of something that isn't to do with police, then maybe. There's just more and more all the time. I think people think, 'Oh, that must be what people want if there's loads of it. So let's write more of that.'

That is the business model for culture more broadly now, isn't it. One person makes something, it does well and we can only replicate that for five years.

You've got to retrain people into watching other things. Otherwise, they'll just eat whatever's in their trough. Surely people have new ideas. I love a documentary, though. Adam Curtis documentaries. Or documentaries from the 70s. That's when they knew how to make a documentary. But there's not much that I really enjoy on TV at the moment. I just want to see something different. You think you scroll through and everything just starts to look the same, doesn't it? Mainly because I think the same people make all the posters, so they all look like the same show over and over and over again.

Are you good at hearing criticism about things you've made, even when it's delivered with love?

I'll hate you forever if you tell me I'm terrible. Some things you think, 'No, this is good. I don't need anyone to tell me that.' But certain things, you're not sure. Often to my partner, Ben, I'll say "What do you think about this?" and he'll say "I'm not sure about that. I don't think... I don't understand it." And I'll [screams] "What do you mean you don't understand it? It's perfectly clear! God, I hate you!" That'll put him off reading anything of mine for a bit. And then I'll calm down and he'll come back. It's just so personal, work, isn't it, you're laying yourself on the line.

Of all your work, what are you most proud of?

There's always bits of every job where you wish you had done *that*. Or 'I've got a weird hand in that shot.' 'Why did you decide that?' Or you realise how you should have done it but when it's too late. That's annoying. I find it very difficult to watch things as they're going out. I didn't watch *Motherland* for ages, until I felt like it'd died down and people would stop watching. And *then* I can watch it on my own with the sound down at first and then gradually increase the volume. And I'm like, 'Oh, God, oh my, oh my, this is making me sick.'

"You've got to retrain people into watching other things. Otherwise, they'll just eat what's in their trough"

Do you check social media when a project goes out.

No, no, no — I'll switch off. The weekend that *Mandy* came out first, I switched my phone off and told Ben I wouldn't look at my phone for at least a week. And all the messages piled up.

Do you read the reviews later?

No, never. That way madness lies. If it's good, or if it's bad, I don't think you should read it. Because at the end of the day, it should be down to you and whether you think it's good. You want people that you trust but you know if you've done a shit job. I don't need to read a review. And it can really put you off doing another series, I think, if someone slags it off, it really takes the wind out of your sails.

ABOVE LEFT: DIANE WEARS TOP AND SKIRT, BOTH BY ROTATE AT END., NECKLACE, BRACELET AND EARRINGS, ALL BY VAN CLEEF & ARPELS; ABOVE RIGHT: DIANE WEARS TOP, BY 16ARLINGTON AT END., BRACELET AND EARRINGS, BOTH BY VAN CLEEF & ARPELS

DIANE WEARS DRESS BY THE ATTICO AT MYTHERESA
MAKEUP: MARIA COMPARETTO USING SUQQU; HAIR: DANIEL DYER;
FASHION ASSISTANT: SACHA DANCE

So, I just don't read anything, good or bad.

Especially a project like *Mandy* where you wrote, directed and starred in it.

There's no one else you can blame if it goes wrong. It's you.

The project you're currently writing, is it going to be at all similar to *Mandy*?

No, I always want to do something completely different. Especially to other things that are out. At the moment, there's a trend for comedy dramas. That's why I wanted to do *Mandy*, because it's out-and-out ridiculousness, which people aren't really doing. I wanted to do something totally stupid. Because there seems to be a lot of comedy dramas that are a bit like *Catastrophe* — they look glossy, and it's about relationships. So I really don't think you need to see my version of that. I think you can easily get influenced by stuff that's on TV now and I think that's why there's so many of those comedy dramas — people think, *'That's* what's popular, I'll do my version.' Personally, I want to see weirder stuff and more unusual things.

So you wouldn't make a *Fleabag*?

There's nothing out there that you can compare it to. Because obviously, I couldn't write anything like *Fleabag* now, because it's been done and it's been done brilliantly. I want to do something that's very me. We've got a Sharon Horgan, we've got a Phoebe Waller-Bridge. I want to do something else.

You're fairly inactive on social media. Often comedians enjoy online banter.

I'm sort of moving away from social media stuff. Maybe I'm just getting old and I feel this isn't my world any more. Since lockdown, it feels... it feels really horrible and aggressive [online]. And I want no part of it. I just want my own little world. I don't really see the point of it — it's boring.

Would you rather be berated for a tweet or for a show?

I suppose cancelled is cancelled, isn't it. Cancel me. I'm not bothered. You care less as you get older, I think. I can't be bothered any more with anything.

Do you think you'll always stay in London? Or would you move to work in Hollywood?

Oh, God, no. I'd never move to the States. I can't understand why anyone would do that — try to crack America. I've got to crack England first, crack London, before I bugger off over there. Apparently, they're gonna do an American *Motherland*, which is really interesting. We showed them the pilot and they thought we were a bit aggressive. So, they said, "We'll do our own version that's not quite so nasty." That's what makes it brilliant, though. I think some comedians enjoy American stuff and enjoy the thought of being really big. I've always loved the British sense of humour. It doesn't really get any better for me than doing something on British TV. It's just the dream. ®

***CUNK ON EARTH* IS COMING TO BBC TWO AND BBC IPLAYER SOON**

Parallel Lives

DIEGO LUNA FOUND HIS INSPIRATION CLOSE TO HOME WHEN IT CAME TO FILMING *ANDOR*, THE PREQUEL SERIES TO *STAR WARS: ROGUE ONE*, ONE OF THE MOST CELEBRATED FILMS OF THE BELOVED SCI-FI FRANCHISE

BY AL HORNER

EMILY SCHUR

Diego Luna adores *Star Wars*, but is open to the possibility that, for almost 40 years, the sci-fi saga sold a lie.

Its theory went that change is only possible when a magical hero enacts it for us; that revolution requires a Skywalker-style "chosen one", who'll swashbuckle their way through a Death Star on behalf of the rest of the galaxy.

It's a story template that's existed for centuries in literature and more recently in film, but the actor doubts that the real world works in the same manner. "You either get involved or you grow indifferent," Luna tells Rolling Stone UK, describing his belief that it's up to ordinary people to rise up and take a stand. "Climate change is the biggest example," he stresses, pointing to how there's no Jedi warrior-like individual waiting in the wings to save us from that existential threat. "It requires working together. We're all going to have to deal with the impact of our existence on this planet sooner or later. Wherever and whoever you are in the world, your actions matter as much as anyone else's. That realisation demands [that each of us] take responsibility and articulate action... which is exactly what *Rogue One* was all about."

Ah, yes, *Rogue One* – the *Star Wars* movie that dared to send a different message from the films in the franchise that preceded it. In the 2016 prequel to 1977's *A New Hope*, Luna starred as Cassian Andor – a ruthless, charismatic freedom fighter willing to lay down his life to help bring an end to the Empire. Cassian, like the rest of the rebels he partners with, had no connection to the Force. He couldn't wield a lightsaber or move objects with his mind. Instead, it was a film that, after 39 years of *Star Wars* stories centring on the Skywalker family, brought to the forefront everyday, non-superpowered people banding together to oppose injustice. "That beautiful idea of regular citizens doing extraordinary things, becoming more powerful when we join together," Luna says, "was and still is very important."

Which is perhaps why on 21 September, Cassian is making a comeback in one of 2022's most eagerly awaited TV series. *Andor* will see Luna return to play the rebel spy across 12 episodes that explore the character's life before the events of *Rogue One*. "It's a series that has the feel and gigantic scope of a *Star Wars* story, but also intimate character moments, in which you're meeting someone that feels like they really exist," the 42-year-old explains, promising a show that carries on the departure in tone offered in the gritty *Rogue One* – a movie which announced its edgier intentions by having Cassian kill an informant in cold blood in its opening 10 minutes.

There's a list as long as Jabba's tail of things Luna cannot tell me about *Andor*: for example, whether or not, like recent *Star Wars* TV hits *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett*, it features cameos from familiar characters like Ewan McGregor's Obi-Wan Kenobi or Hayden Christensen's Darth Vader. "Come on, man! I can feel someone watching me through the window, waiting for me to slip up," he laughs, suspecting Disney may have positioned a Sith assassin somewhere in the shadows outside his holiday home. (It's mid-July and Luna is supposed to be on vacation. Instead, he's cheerily fielding calls and meetings all day; being one of the most in-demand actors this side of Dagobah has its drawbacks.)

What Luna can share is that the series is a vital and daring new chapter in the sci-fi saga that, like *Rogue One* before it, pushes the boundaries of what a *Star Wars* story can be. "I've never worked on a project so intense," he reveals. "You know what's going to happen but you don't know how. The storytelling is psychologically driven – it's about the complexity of characters, not necessarily the result of an event." Its title, *Andor*, "in a way misleads you", he says. "It's not just about him. It's about the beginning of a revolution, and the many characters it takes to spark that kind of change." Getting to this moment, however, saw the actor facing down challenges of his own.

LUNA HAS NEVER stormed a military base in outer space, nor skulked around an alien world, blaster cocked, ready to take down a swarm of stormtroopers. That's not to say there aren't other ways, however, in which his and Cassian's lives have overlapped. In common with the rebel spy – and many other characters who frequent the *Star Wars* universe, a place where characters are frequently driven by parental absence or loss – Luna suffered the death of a parent at an early age. His mother, British costume designer Fiona Alexander, died in a car crash when Luna was just two years old. Like Cassian, Luna attempted to fill the void left in her wake by throwing himself into a cause. Cassian's was guerrilla warfare; Luna's, meanwhile, was acting.

Years on stage in Mexico City (encouraged by his father Alejandro, a set designer) led to appearances in Latin American TV shows. Acting helped him feel closer to his late mother: "I felt her warmth around me," he told *C Magazine* in 2019 about his early work on stage and screen. It helped him get a handle on intermittent episodes in which his father would find him sleepwalking in the middle of the night, venturing out onto

STARRING ROLE The first series of *Andor* tells half of Cassian's story with the Rebellion, while the second series will lead up to the beginning of *Rogue One*

"I've never worked on a project so intense. You know what's going to happen but you don't know how"

CASSIAN ANDOR (DIEGO LUNA) IN LUCASFILM'S *ANDOR*, EXCLUSIVELY ON DISNEY+. ©2022 LUCASFILM LTD. & TM. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

his patio, sharing imaginary conversations with his mother. These episodes soon subsided, as Luna discovered a confidence and catharsis in performing that would eventually lead him to his breakout role. *Y Tu Mamá También* – Alfonso Cuarón's acclaimed 2001 coming-of-age road-trip drama – saw Luna play an upper-class dreamer named Tenoch Iturbide opposite his childhood friend Gael García Bernal. It was an instant Spanish-language cinematic classic, announcing the actor as a sensitive, sparkly-eyed screen presence it was impossible to drag your eyes away from. Every frame he appeared in, critics noted, seemed to crackle with electricity and longing.

The actor quickly built on this reputation with appearances in films like 2002's Kahlo biopic *Frida* and, the following year, gangster drama *Nicotina*, causing Hollywood to sit up and take notice. Steven Spielberg cast him in *The Terminal* (2004). Gus Van Sant also came calling. Even Katy Perry couldn't resist his magnetic allure, casting him as a love interest in a 2010 music video that currently sits at 924 million YouTube views and counting ('The One That Got Away'). During these years, it was clear he was making progress climbing a certain ladder in American film, but Luna never allowed himself to truly believe that he could reach its highest rungs. Hispanic men, after all, were historically boxed out of meaty parts in Hollywood blockbusters. Drug runners and restaurant waiters? Those parts were available in abundance for Mexican actors like Luna. Heroic leads? Not so much.

"I thought I belonged very much in independent cinema. That was my home. Theatre was my home," Luna recalls. "A *Star Wars* movie [on the other hand] was what I went to see at the weekend with a box of popcorn in the cinema. It was far, far away from what I thought I was capable of." As a result, when the offer to play Cassian in *Rogue One* came in, it sent a shockwave through him only a couple of notches below that of a planet-ending Death Star laser blast.

The film would become a smash hit, generating over $1bn at the box office and earning rave reviews for its bold conclusion, in which – spoiler alert – Cassian and co sacrifice themselves to achieve their mission. "I remember watching it with my daughter. Towards the end, she was yelling: 'What's happening? What sort of film is this?' She was horrified," laughs Luna. "Then later we began chatting and she realised that it's beautiful to serve something bigger than us."

This, incidentally, is a subject that Luna found himself contemplating at length in the period around *Rogue One*'s release. As the film debuted in cinemas, Luna was anointed a sought-after Hollywood leading man at long last. How did he respond to his new status? "I left," Luna grins.

In 2017, the star made the decision to move his family back to his native Mexico. He'd been living in a house with a beach view in Los Angeles but felt an urgent need to try to use his position to better the community where he grew up. "I don't want my kids to see me looking at the news from my living room in LA, complaining about what's happening... I want them to see me here, fighting for something I love," he told the *LA Times* in 2018. Reflecting on the decision today, he appears

EMILY SCHUR

OUT OF THIS WORLD Being part of the *Star Wars* empire wasn't something Luna thought would ever come his way

"If I can use my profile to shift attention onto the people and things I believe are worthy of attention, then I like to do that"

bashful at Rolling Stone UK's suggestion that there are echoes of Cassian in his determination to defend the place he calls home. "Mexico is a country where you're really exposed to contrast," he explains. "It's very rich culturally, but at the same time it's a very unfair place. I belong to Mexico – but in order to belong you have to *activate*. You have to get involved."

Luna's interpretation of "getting involved" is as intense as his *Star Wars* character's trademark glare. First he starred in *Privacidad*, a play about the Mexican government's surveillance of human rights defenders. He then became a vocal opponent to then-president Enrique Peña Nieto's plans to expand Mexico's vicious "war on drugs", which had resulted in more than 230,000 deaths. He also got to work establishing a non-profit organisation with García Bernal that raised $1.5m in relief funds following the 2017 Mexico City earthquake.

Cassian's activism might be more explosive, but Luna's is no less effective. "I think that what we do has a great potential to bring reflection on and attention to what matters. It's through films that I became aware of many things that matter to me today. So as filmmakers we have that opportunity," he says. "If I can use my profile to shift attention onto the people and things that I believe are worthy of attention, then I like to do that."

With the release of *Andor*, Luna's profile may be about to hit even greater heights. The series, created by *Bourne Identity* and *Michael Clayton* screenwriter Tony Gilroy, is primarily set five years before that mission in *Rogue One*, although there's plenty of flashbacks too, filling in the blanks in Cassian's journey following the less-is-more approach to his backstory in *Rogue One*. "If you analyse that film, there's very little information. We know very little about him. So we have a lot of room to play in," teases Luna. With its elongated runtime, compared to the compact two-hour space afforded to *Rogue One*, it's said to show more methodically all the ways that oppressive forces can radicalise, colonise and brutalise those in their way. And as for Cassian, well, by the end of *Rogue One*, his friendship with Jyn Erso (Felicity Jones) has softened some of his harder edges. This version of Cassian is not yet that man. Instead, it's the freedom fighter at his most morally complex, say sources close to the series.

Luna is about to begin shooting the show's second season, which he says will intensify the timely questions and themes of the initial 12 episodes about to land on screens. "It's quite interesting to tell a story about heroic actions that transcends the moment where the hero gets the medal and walks off into the sunset saying: 'We made it!' In *Rogue One*, they didn't make it. But it was still worth it, you know? It's an interesting moment right now to be sending that message," he comments. When the idea for *Andor* came around, Luna had thought his time portraying the character had come to an end, that his days dispatching stormtroopers and sneaking around Empire bases was over. Now he's back, he's not taking the experience for granted. "I feel lucky. Very lucky," he beams. "*Rogue One* was always something very special in my life. Now I feel even more at home in that galaxy far, far away."

***ANDOR* IS ON DISNEY+ FROM 21 SEPTEMBER**

CASSIAN ANDOR (DIEGO LUNA) IN LUCASFILM'S *ANDOR*, EXCLUSIVELY ON DISNEY+. ©2022 LUCASFILM LTD. & TM. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

MATT SMITH: EVERYDAY ALIEN

From Time Lord to Targaryen prince, via Netflix and Hollywood, Matt Smith is one of Britain's most in-demand actors. But has anyone told him that?

BY **PAUL KIRKLEY**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BARTEK SZMIGULSKI**
STYLING BY **JOSEPH KOCHARIAN**

MATT SMITH DOESN'T USE Google Maps. He likes the "adventure", he says, of finding his own way around. Hence our current quest, on a muggy summer's afternoon in London, to locate the nearest pub – a journey he appears to be undertaking as much in hope as expectation.

But then, travelling hopefully is very much the Matt Smith way. By any metric, the 39-year-old is one of Britain's most successful actors: no other former Doctor Who, for example, has made a bigger splash in Hollywood, to say nothing of his Emmy-nominated turn as a young Duke of Edinburgh in Netflix's *The Crown*.

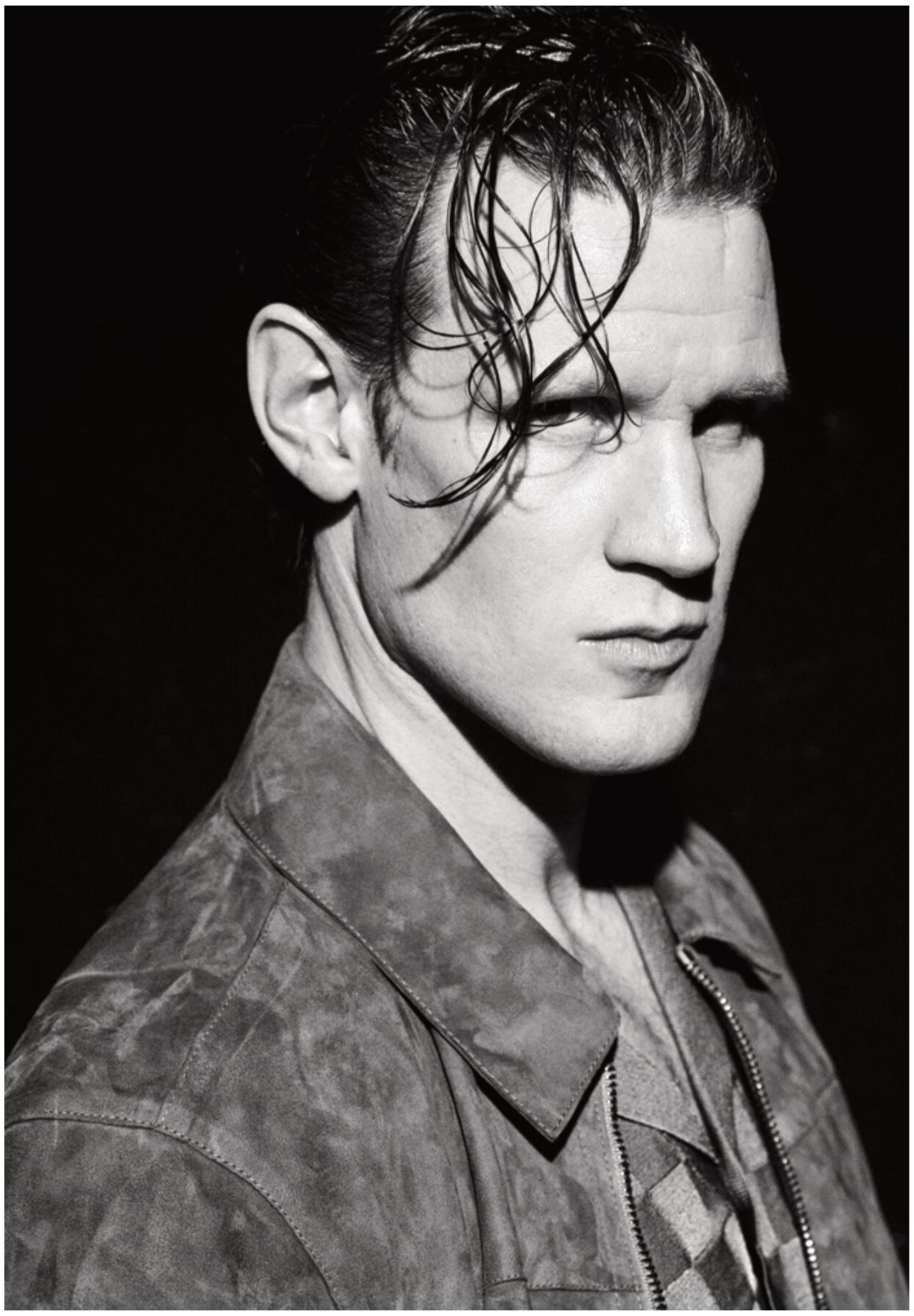
But not only does Smith not act like a movie star – there's no PR minder tagging along for the interview, and when his inbuilt radar does bring us to the pub, his hand's straight in his pocket – he genuinely doesn't seem to think he is one.

"It's strange, as an actor," he says, reflecting on the decade since he handed over his TARDIS key. "You're sort of rolling the dice with every job, and it could go either way. So you know, it's felt challenging. Has it been as good as some people's trajectories and careers? Probably not. Is it as bad as some others? Probably not. Am I somewhere in the middle? Probably, yeah."

This modesty – which is slightly at odds with the rock-star poses he's just spent the past few hours striking for Rolling Stone UK's shoot, a task completed with lightning-fast efficiency and zero fuss – is a recurring feature during our conversation. At one point, he pushes back on the suggestion that *Doctor Who* made him an overnight superstar, saying: "I'm not sure that's quite correct. I think you become an overnight..." He searches for the right word, before settling on "something."

Even the show he's here to talk up, HBO's $200m *Game of Thrones* prequel *House of the Dragon*, is discussed with a certain caution. "I haven't seen it yet – and often your experience of making it is different from your experience of watching it," he observes. "But I hope it's good. Obviously, you're standing on the legacy of a show that had a big impact on people. And you're never going to be able to recreate that. It's a bit like being in a band: you've got to play the hits, but you've also got to hope the second album delivers something that moves the narrative forward.

"It's a great cast," he adds, of an ensemble that includes such notable British talent as Paddy Considine, Rhys Ifans, Olivia Cooke and Steve Toussaint. "The characters are really, really interesting. And it's based on George R.R. Martin's book [*Fire & Blood*, 2018]. That's one thing we've got going for us: we're not just plucking fantasy out of thin air. It comes from the mind of George, who's really clever, and has created a world that feels like it's translatable."



Has he read the book? "Not in its entirety," he says. It's a *big* book. "Yeah," he nods. "It's a big fucking book."

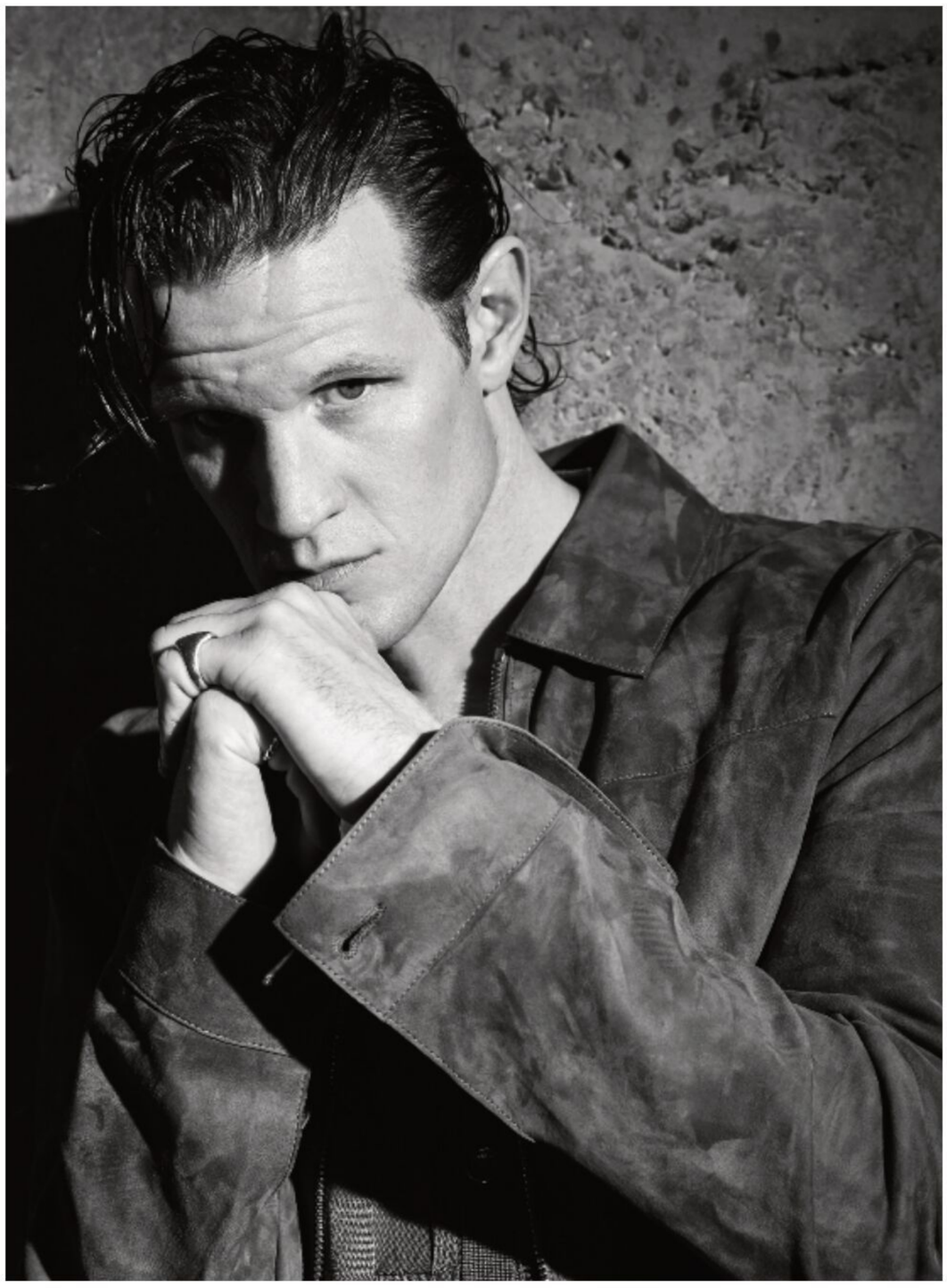
Set two centuries before *Game of Thrones*, the series chronicles the dramatic fall of the House Targaryen – the dynasty that has ruled over the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros for nearly 300 years (and would later produce Emilia Clarke's Mother of Dragons, Daenerys, in *Thrones*). Smith plays Prince Daemon Targaryen, younger brother of Considine's King Viserys, and heir presumptive to the Iron Throne. But Viserys' firstborn child, Princess Rhaenyra (Emma D'Arcy), has ambitions to become the Seven Kingdoms' first queen – a rupture with tradition that threatens to spark civil war across the realm.

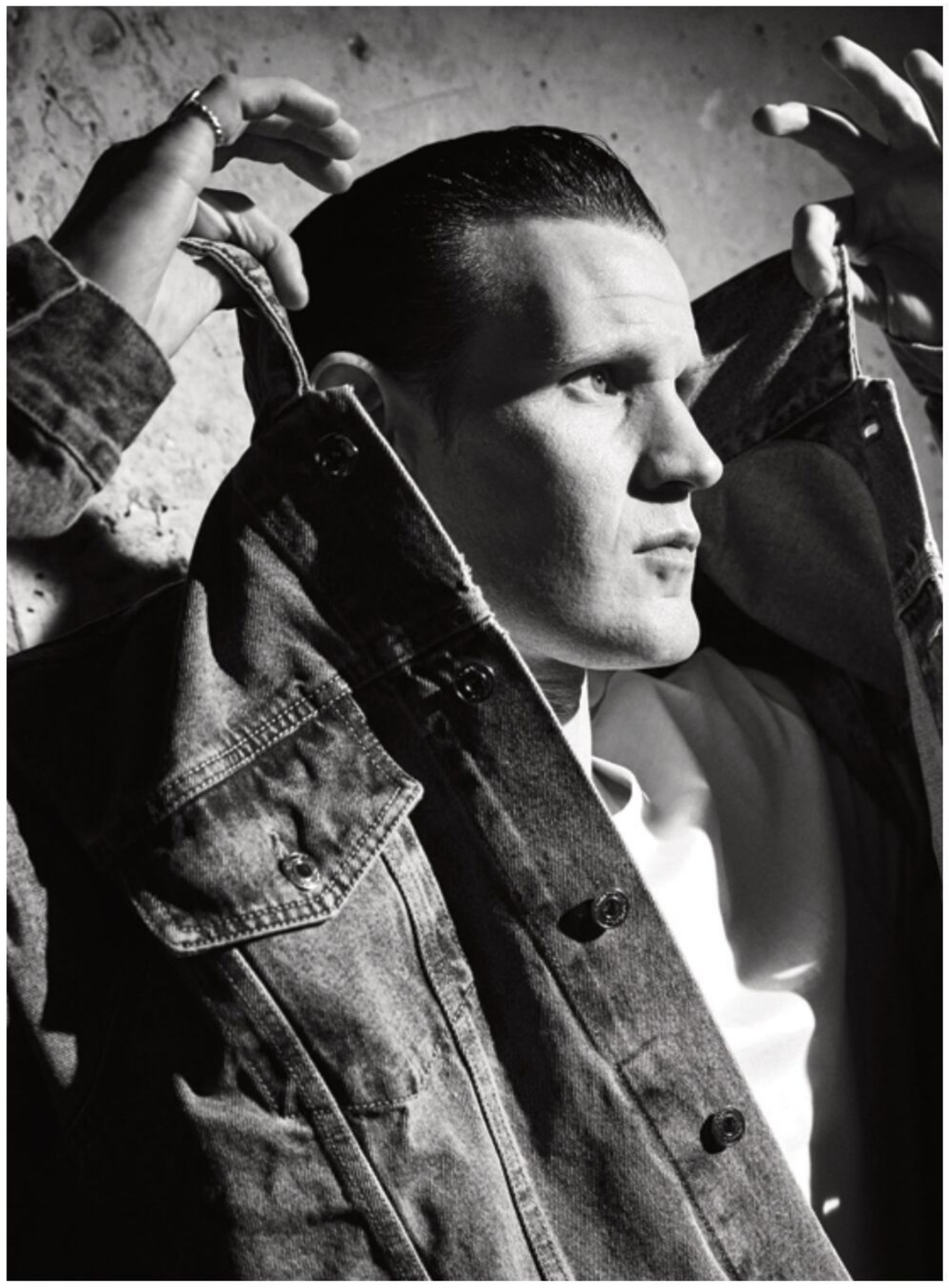
"He's sort of an outsider," Smith says of Daemon. "He's not black and white, there are shades of grey with him, which is what interested me about him, really. And his relationship with his brother is really interesting. It was a joy working with Paddy Considine, who I've admired for so long, and Rhys Ifans."

Sporting the Targaryens' signature blond mane was less of a joy. "It looks great but

PREVIOUS SPREAD: MATT WEARS DENIM JACKET BY OFF-WHITE AT END.; THIS PAGE: MATT WEARS JACKET BY MR.P AT MR PORTER, POLO SHIRT BY REISS X CHÉ; OPPOSITE: MATT WEARS JACKET, TOP AND TROUSERS ALL BY GIORGIO ARMANI, SOCKS BY SOCKSHOP, SHOES BY VALENTINO, JEWELLERY (THROUGHOUT) MATT'S OWN

"IT'S STRANGE AS AN ACTOR. YOU'RE SORT OF ROLLING THE DICE WITH EVERY JOB"





it's a fucking pain in the arse," says Smith of the platinum wig that was his constant companion during the 10-month shoot. "It took an hour and a quarter to put on every day. I was like, 'Obviously the Targaryens are known for their blonde hair – but can't we just give them some highlights?'"

Game of Thrones was renowned for its exotic locations, but while Smith did get to go to Spain and Portugal ("briefly"), he spent most of the shoot "in a shed in Leavesden. It could have been worse," he shrugs. "At least it was near my house."

Daemon is a fierce warrior and an accomplished dragonrider, which means Smith also gets his own scaly co-star. "My dragon's called Caraxes. He's a bit of an avatar of Daemon, really – he's grumpy, sardonic, insular, volatile, chaotic. There's a very strong connection between the dragon and the dragonrider." It's not all done with CGI, either: "There's an actual dragon, and you sit on it and they move it around by remote control, while firing rain and all sorts of things at you."

Does it ever feel like a strange way to make a living? "Every day," he laughs. "That's one of the glories of being an actor. It arrests you out of the mundane."

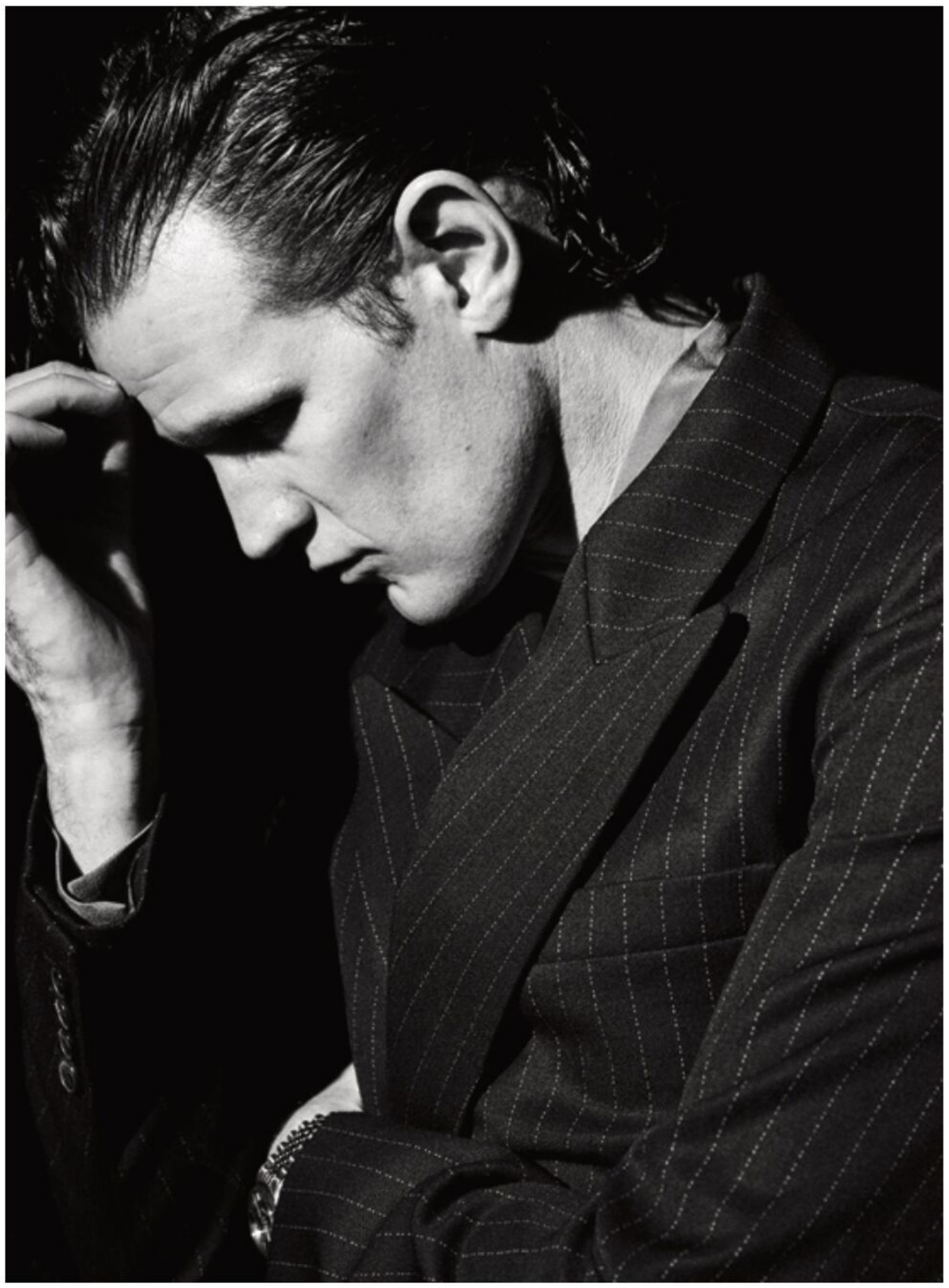
"I REMEMBER WALKING DOWN THE STREET AND SOMEONE SHOUTING 'DON'T BREAK *DOCTOR WHO*'"

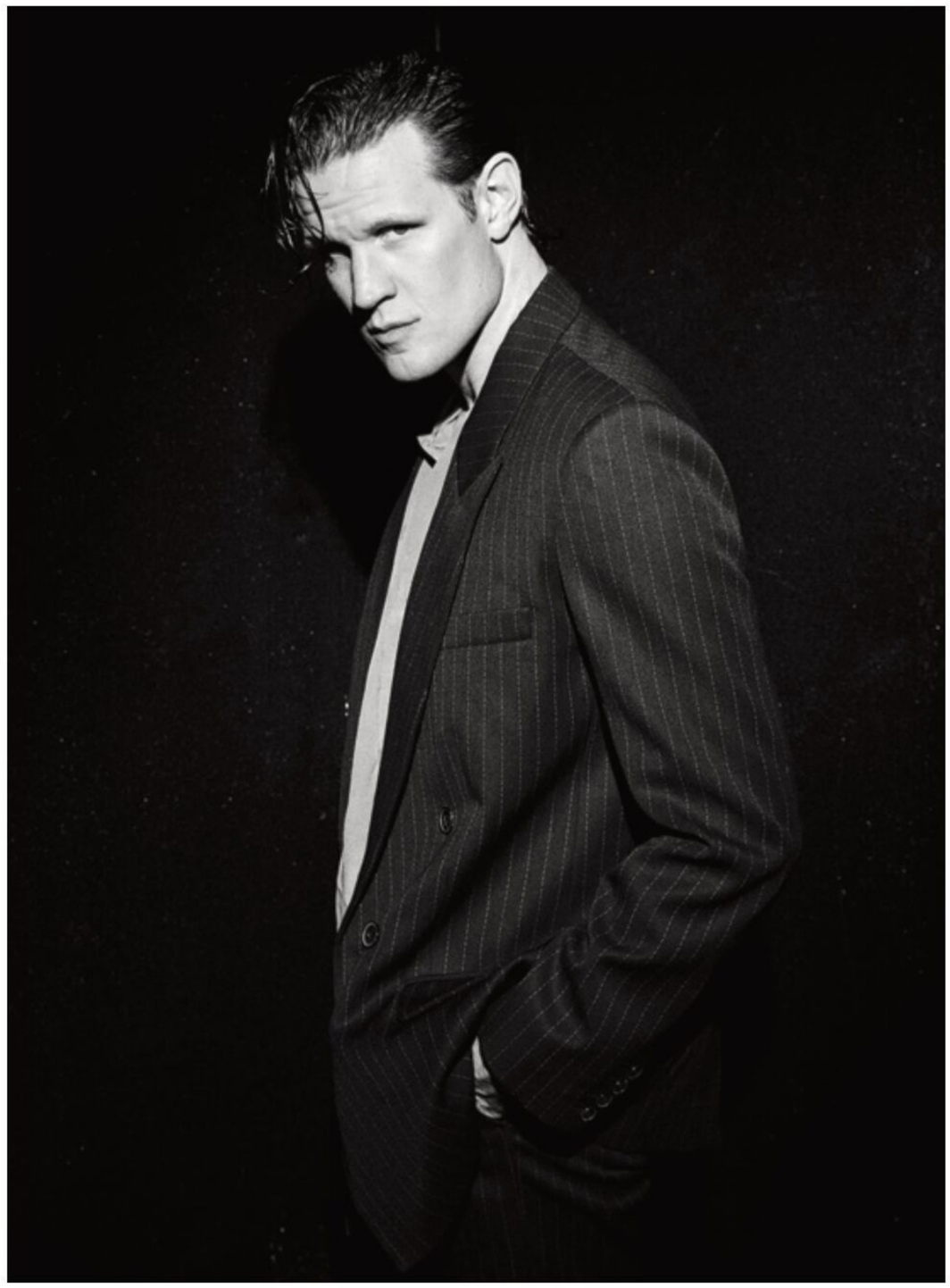
When *Game of Thrones* launched in 2011, Smith was off having adventures in space and time – but even with *Doctor Who*'s punishing schedule, he watched every episode. "I've always been a fan. It's just good, isn't it? I remember going to Comic Con for *Doctor Who*, and meeting George R.R. Martin on a boat. *Game of Thrones* hadn't come out yet, and I remember all the cast being there, having no idea what a huge juggernaut it was about to become..."

As a fan, what did he make of *Thrones*' controversial ending? "I think you're always going to disappoint some people," he considers. "Ultimately, the body of work they produced stands up. Was it a perfect ending? It's a matter of opinion. It didn't bother me, I liked it."

The show also raised eyebrows with its sexually explicit content (Stewart Lee famously dubbed it 'Peter Stringfellow's *Lord of the Rings*') and Emilia Clarke has since spoken of her discomfort at some of the nude scenes. Is it, perhaps, already a product of a different time – and should we expect less of that sort of thing in *House of the Dragon*? Apparently not. "You do find yourself asking, 'Do we need *another* sex scene?'" says Smith. "And they're like, 'Yeah, we do.' I guess you have to ask yourself: 'What are you doing? Are you representing the books, or are you diluting the books to represent the time [we're living in]?' And I actually think it's

ABOVE LEFT: MATT WEARS JACKET BY MR.P AT MR PORTER, POLO SHIRT BY REISS X CHÉ; ABOVE RIGHT: MATT WEARS DENIM JACKET BY OFF-WHITE AT END., TOP BY SUNSPEL AT SELFRIDGES





your job to represent the books truthfully and honestly, as they were written."

So Daemon has his share of bedchamber scenes is what you're saying? "Yeah – slightly too much, if you ask me," he laughs.

In person, Smith is self-effacing, generous, endlessly curious company, asking almost as many questions as he answers. This is the first interview he's ever done over a pint, he says, but you suspect it won't be the last. (He's going easy, though, because he's just bought a new place, and has shelves to put up when we're done.)

He's a curious mix of personalities: half blokeish lad next door, half exotic, otherworldly creature, with a passion for footie and poetry in equal measure. As a teenager, he was a promising football talent, signing as a youth player with his local club, Northampton Town, then Nottingham Forest and Leicester City. When a back injury put paid to that dream, a teacher who'd spotted his acting potential made repeated attempts to involve him in plays and drama festivals, which Smith would inevitably not show up for. Eventually, though, he was persuaded to apply for the National Youth Theatre, which he followed up with a drama and creative writing degree in Norwich.

With a handful of stage and TV roles under his belt – including the political drama *Party Animals*, and a raunchy liaison with Billie Piper in *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* – Smith was just 26 when he was announced as the 11th Doctor in 2009. (He still holds the record as the youngest Time Lord: Peter Davison and the incoming Ncuti Gatwa were both 29 when cast.)

Was he scared? Very. "I was turning up to work going, 'Fuck, I can't do this,'" he recalls. "I used to phone my dad, going 'I can't do this.' And he'd be like, 'Come on, get your head down, you can.' The show is such a jewel in the BBC crown, and has such global appeal... if it doesn't work, and you're at the centre of it, then there's nowhere to hide. I remember walking down the street around that time and someone shouting, 'Don't break *Doctor Who*!'"

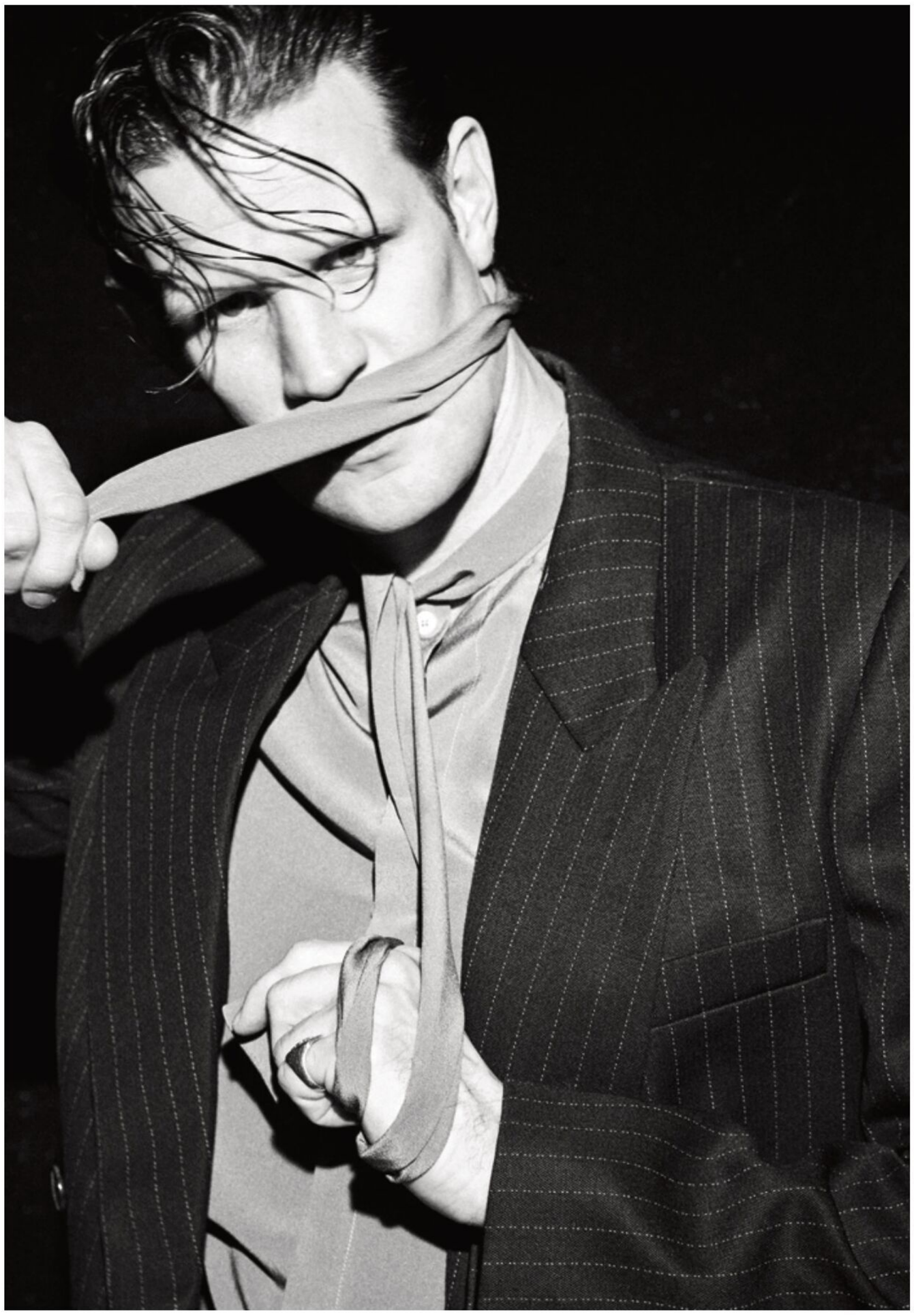
He didn't break it. In fact, he was a natural: old yet young, alien yet human, serious yet silly, Smith arguably captured the enigmatic, contradictory nature of the ageless Doctor better than any actor before or since. With his preppy, professorial bow tie and tweeds, he walked a fine line between action hero and bookish nerd: a Lord of Time capable of bending armies to his will one minute, a clueless naïf barely in control of his own limbs the next. (To date, he remains the only actor to have been nominated for a BAFTA in the role.)

When I tell him all this, he seems genuinely delighted, reaching over for a high-five. "You never tire of hearing that as a Doctor," he says. "It's a wonderful club to be part of, because... you know, *Doctor Who* is just fucking brilliant, isn't it?"

He's excited to see what Ncuti Gatwa does with the role ("he's going to be fabulous"), and by the return of Russell T Davies, who'd left before Smith's time, as showrunner. He's also pleased – but not hugely surprised ("Russell's back, it makes sense") – to see his predecessor David Tennant slipping back into his skinny spaceman suit for a victory lap around the TARDIS. "What a Doctor, what an actor, what a bloke. Arguably, David is..." he seems about to say 'the one' but, perhaps mindful of the *esprit de corps* among his fellow Time Lords, opts for "a totally seminal Doctor."

Did that add to the pressure, when he had

MATT WEARS JACKET, SHIRT AND TROUSERS, ALL BY VALENTINO



to follow him into the show? "Yeah. Can you imagine? Because he was as popular as it gets, really. But he was so kind to me, David, in the transition. He's just a good bloke."

Tennant's return raises the obvious question: would Smith ever go back? "Maybe, if it was the right script," he muses. "I mean, I don't know if I've got too old now. It would have to be really right."

There's an argument to be made for the *Who* Class of 2010-13 – Smith, Karen Gillan (Amy Pond) and later Jenna Coleman (Clara Oswald) – being the most successful in the show's long history, in terms of their subsequent careers. "I think that's true of Karen," he says, diffident as ever, of Gillan's ascent to Hollywood supremacy in the likes of *Jumanji* and a slate of Marvel movies. "She's taking over the world; she's a bona-fide movie star. I love her. I was at her wedding recently, and she's just the most impressive woman – laser sharp, super bright, really funny. I just feel very proud of her."

As for whether his own post-*Who* career has met – or exceeded, or fallen short of – his hopes when he left the show, he says he can't really remember what his expectations were. You've done more Hollywood movies than probably any other Doctor, I point out. "I mean... yeah, I dunno," he shrugs. "Maybe, maybe not. I've tried to do challenging shit, things that are slightly out of my wheelhouse. For better or worse."

The Crown was definitely 'for better'. As the young Prince Philip, he was a rascally foil to Claire Foy's cut-glass Queen Elizabeth, earning a Primetime Emmy nomination for his troubles.

He grew fond of the old boy while playing him, he says. Was he sad when he died? "I was, yeah. When I got the part, my granddad, who was very anti-royal, said, 'You're not playing that bloody berk, are you?' And I'd always had a similar antipathy towards them, I suppose. But there was a courage and a defiance and a humour to Philip – which got him into trouble, and was at times ill-judged – but at least he was himself. And God, isn't that refreshing, in this day and age? That he was himself, not some polished version of something."

Other successes on his balance sheet include his well-received turn as a sleazy talent manager in Edgar Wright's stylish horror thriller *Last Night in Soho*, and passion project forays into American arthouse cinema like Ryan Gosling's *Lost River*. On stage, meanwhile, he starred as Patrick Bateman in the stage musical adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, and reunited with Claire Foy for the intimate two-hander *Lungs* at the Old Vic.

That dice he mentioned earlier hasn't always rolled his way, though: *Terminator Genisys*, in which he made his Hollywood blockbuster debut alongside Arnold Schwarzenegger and Emilia Clarke (of the House Targaryen) proved an expensive misfire, while *Morbius* – his recent sortie into the on-screen superhero genre – is the flop that launched a million smirking memes. Although Smith, as the main antagonist – a vampire investment banker – has once again emerged relatively unscathed from the wreckage, common consent being he's the best thing in it.

"Yeah, it was thrown under the bus," he smiles. "But you just have to roll with it. What else are you gonna do? It's a film, at the end of the day, we're not saving lives. For whatever reason, it didn't quite work out and... It is what it is."

For an actor who made his name saving the universe every Saturday, Smith has played a lot of villains, bringing a sly, cat-like presence that's strikingly at odds with his matey real-life persona. Maybe it's something to do with that slightly alien, unknowable quality: on the brink of his 40s, he's still boyishly good-looking, but not in a boring way (with his square jaw and swoosh of hair, he was once described by his *Doctor Who* boss Steven Moffat as looking like "a cartoon of a handsome man").

He's also been one half of some very beautiful couples, dating model Daisy Lowe

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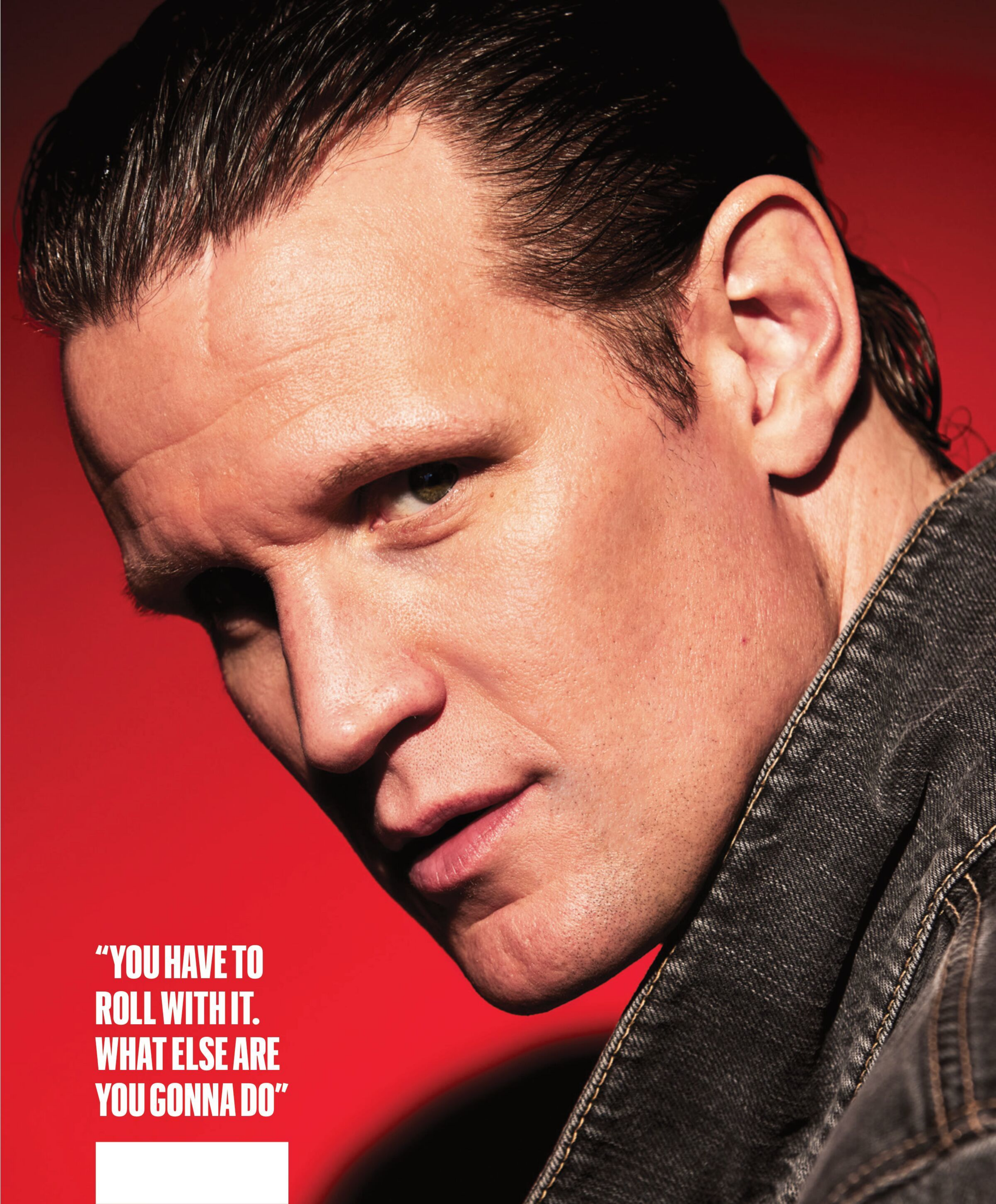
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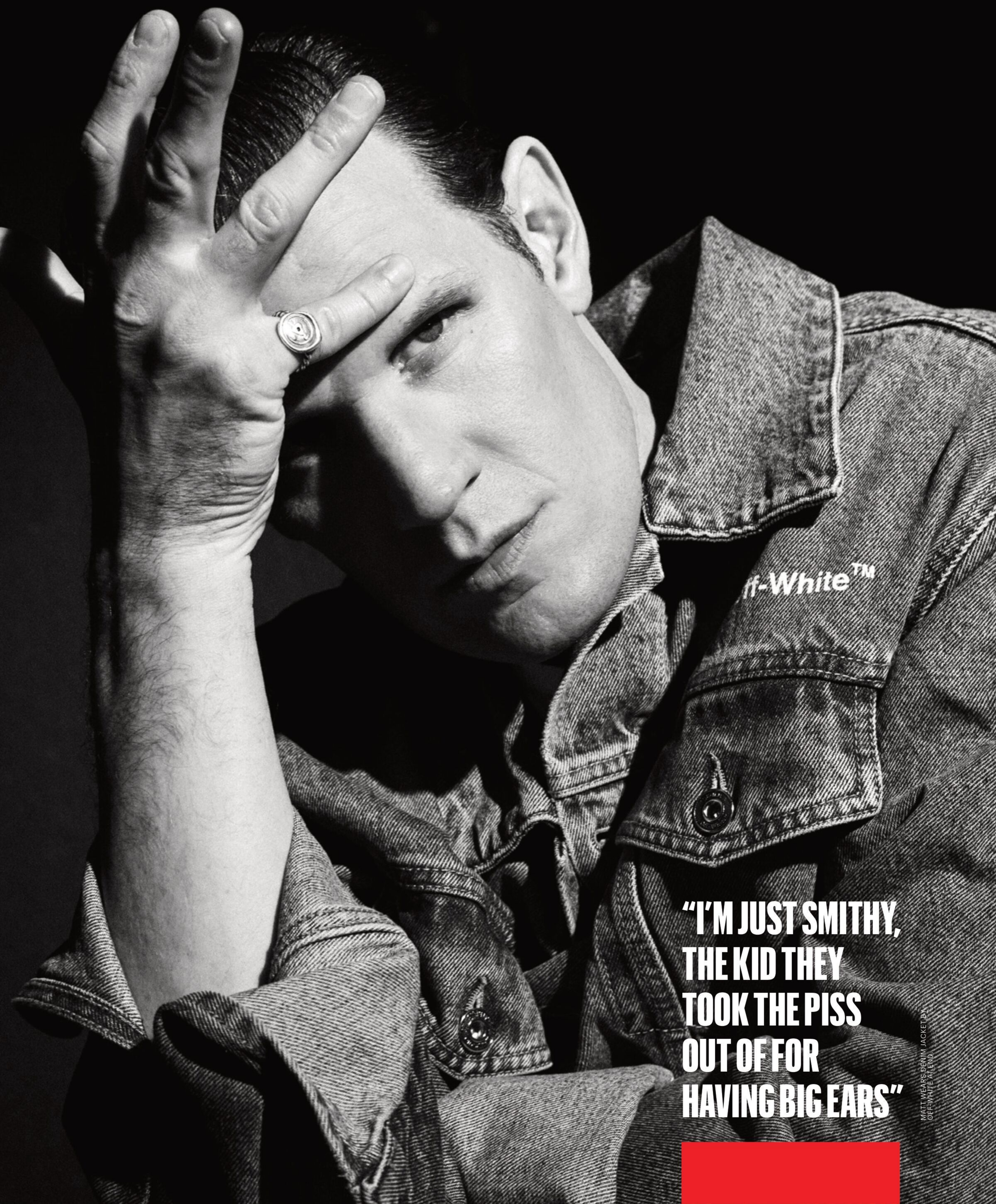
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"I'M JUST SMITHY, THE KID THEY TOOK THE PISS OUT OF FOR HAVING BIG EARS"
MATT WEARS DENIM JACKET BY OFF-WHITE AT END.

MATT WEARS JACKET BY MR.P AT MR PORTER, POLO SHIRT BY REISS X CHÉ, TROUSERS BY BURBERRY AT END.; ALL GROOMING BY PETRA SELLGE AT THE WALL GROUP USING BOY DE CHANEL AND NO.1 DE CHANEL ESSENCE LOTION AND BODY SERUM-IN-MIST; FASHION ASSISTANT: SACHA DANCE

before embarking on a five-year romance with Lily James. Today, he politely declines to discuss relationships, past or present, but says he'd "definitely like a family one day". I ask if his job, and the scrutiny that comes with it, makes that side of life more difficult. "I don't know, because... that's what I know," he says. "It's just my life.

"I've always had quite a localised group of friends," he adds, having made a start, after some deliberation, on a second pint. ("There goes the DIY – I've fucked it, haven't I?") He's known his two best friends all his life. "We grew up in the same street. All of my mates are from back home – I've got, like, 10 or 15 proper boys from Northampton."

What do they make of his lifestyle – is it a bit of an *Entourage* situation? "Nah, they couldn't give a fuck." Really? "Really – they literally couldn't give a fuck. They're my mates, and I'm proud of them. Some of them are bricklayers, some of them work in recruitment, some of them work in Mothercare. And to them, I'm just Smithy, the kid they took the piss out of for having big ears."

He still hangs out with his family (including sister Laura, a dancer who appeared in *that* Eric Prydz 'Call on Me' video) as often as he can; the week before our meeting, he was at Wimbledon with his mum, Lynne, who's still his biggest fan, as anyone who's seen her Twitter account will attest. "She's always like, 'Can I tweet this?' And I'm like, 'Please, God, no, enough!'" he laughs. "But I'm lucky to have her. And that's what you want for your mum, isn't it? To be proud."

She's got plenty to be proud of, of course. But, in his heart, would Smith – a lifelong Blackburn Rovers fan – have swapped it all to be a professional footballer?

"It depends on the level of football we're talking about," he considers. "If it's Thierry Henry, then maybe. Like I said, the dice can roll two ways. If I'd been a footballer, my life would've been completely different. I mean, I wouldn't be sat here having two pints before trying to put up a shelf."

That said, his playing career would be long over by now. How does he feel about turning 40 in October? "All right, actually," he says. "I'm embracing middle age."

Is it an opportunity to pause and reflect on the four decades of Matthew Robert Smith so far? And if so, what does he see? "Oh God, I dunno," he says, brows knitting. "I feel fortunate I've had a good family, good friends. I feel fortunate to do what I do. It could have been worse, couldn't it?"

Is he – huge word, this – happy? "I mean, you know... what's happy?" he says. "I'm happy when Blackburn win. I'm happy having a pint with my mates. I'm happy going to Wimbledon with my mum. Yeah, I'm happy. But sometimes life, you know, fucking..." He mimes a forceful tennis backhand. "That's just how it goes, isn't it?"

As for the future, if Prince Daemon Targaryen survives the first season of *House of the Dragon* ("with a good wind, you never know," he teases), then he may well be spending a lot more time in Westeros-Leavesden. And beyond that? He's just made a film with Ralph Fiennes – *The Forgiven*, also starring Jessica Chastain, out in September – and he'd be more than satisfied with a career like his, he says. "I'd also like to do some Shakespeare, which I've never done. I didn't want to put my friends through three hours of that.

"For me, it's not about being successful," he insists. "It's about being actively challenged and engaged. I mean, what are you gonna do – stay in bed all day and read the papers? You've got to get up and do it. I played a lot of sport when I was younger, and it doesn't leave you, that idea you've got to keep going, keep improving, keep getting better. And I would hope that, in my 40s, I'll become a better actor than I was in my 30s. I've got to," he says, draining his glass before heading off to almost certainly ignore those shelves. "Otherwise, what's the point?" ®

***HOUSE OF THE DRAGON* IS ON SKY ATLANTIC / NOW TV**

TOLKIEN HEADS

Robert Aramayo and Benjamin Walker, stars of Amazon's billion-dollar fantasy blockbuster *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, on the challenge — and privilege — of bringing Middle-earth's Second Age to the screen

By Paul Kirkley

If Robert Aramayo and Benjamin Walker are feeling the pressure of being front and centre of the most expensive TV show ever made, they're doing a good job of not showing it.

In fact, bring it on, says Walker, who will bring Gil-galad to life in Amazon's new billion-dollar *Lord of the Rings* series, *The Rings of Power*.

"The pressure is important," insists the actor, on whose broad shoulders the success of the programme partly rests. "Anything worth doing is worth doing well, so I feel like our best is the bare minimum."

Besides, he adds, it's not so much the financial as the emotional investment in the show that feels like the biggest responsibility: for millions of people around the world, the works of J.R.R. Tolkien are something approaching sacred texts. Fortunately, it's a devotion Walker and Aramayo both caught on to early, a shared passion for the tales of Middle-earth spanning their very different upbringings in the American south (Walker) and the north of England (Aramayo).

"*The Hobbit* was the first book I ever read," says Aramayo – who plays Elrond – when the three of us get together over video call in July. "I was quite young, so I'm not sure how much of it I understood, but I loved it. And I was obsessed with the movies – I used to play *The Lord of the Rings* in the playground."

Walker was similarly introduced to the Tolkien universe at a young age. "I have an older brother, who was an avid reader, and the first book he ever gave me was *The Hobbit*," he says. "I read it because I wanted to be like him, and as smart as he was. So I think we feel as much pressure from ourselves, and our love of the material, as anything."

Set thousands of years before the events of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Rings of Power* will, in the words of showrunners Patrick McKay and JD Payne, "unite all the major stories of Middle-earth's Second Age: the forging of the rings, the rise of the Dark Lord Sauron, the epic tale of Númenor [Tolkien's equivalent of the Atlantis myth], and the last alliance of Elves and Men". It's a period of Middle-earth history that hasn't been seen on screen, and even in literary terms, is largely confined to *The Lord of the Rings*'s extensive appendices (along with some of Tolkien's correspondence, and posthumous publications such as *Unfinished Tales* and *The Silmarillion*). "Until now, audiences have only seen the story of the One Ring," say the showrunners. "But before there was one, there were many..."

Gil-galad, High King of the Elves of the West, is one figure who, until now, has mostly existed in these margins, his exploits chronicled by other characters through story and song. As such, he enjoys a mythic status, even by Tolkien standards. But Walker is typically unfazed. "Again, I don't see that as a burden. I see it as an opportunity."

The actor's description of his character could almost be lifted from mythology itself: "Gil-galad is a peacetime politician and a wartime general, and he's constantly walking that line between the two," he explains. "He's also mysterious – he has the gift of foresight, so he's vibrating on another level; he has his finger on the pulsing of evil in Middle-earth. He's constantly vigilant."

I ask Walker if playing such a powerful figure can't help but rub off on him a bit: does he stride to the on-set catering truck feeling like a king? "Usually when I'm going to the catering truck, I'm tripping over my robes," he laughs. "But what's the saying? Everyone knows who the king is because everyone kneels. Otherwise, it's just another guy in a funny hat. And I'd say the thing that makes me feel most like a king is the presence of my fellow actors."

Aramayo's character, Elrond Half-elven – so named because of his mixed Elven/human heritage – will be familiar to people who've read *The Hobbit* and

The Lord of the Rings, or seen Peter Jackson's film adaptations, in which an older Elrond, now Lord of Rivendell, was played by Hugo Weaving. "I love those movies, and I love Hugo Weaving – it's an honour to play the role he played," says Aramayo. "But the most relevant thing, for me, was to look at Elrond's past, not his future, because there's so much to achieve – there's so much ahead of him, in order to become

the version we've seen and read about in the Third Age.

"At this point, he's young and very eager and curious about the world. He has a love of mortal beings, but it's a complicated relationship. Him being a half-Elf, and how that makes him different, was something I was really interested to explore."

This isn't Aramayo's first fantasy rodeo. In fact, he seems to have cornered a niche market in 'younger models of beloved fantasy characters', having previously played Ned Stark – who would later acquire, then dramatically lose, the head of Sean Bean – in *Game of Thrones*'s extensive flashback sequences. The difference there, he says, is he had to be much more faithful to the established performance. "I even wore Sean's wig, and I think I borrowed his sword."

When HBO launched *Game of Thrones* in 2011, comparisons were inevitably drawn to *The Lord of the Rings*. Now, it's likely to be the other way round, with Amazon looking to carve a slice of the fantasy pie for themselves – a contest given added spice by the launch of *Thrones* prequel *House of the Dragon*, just days before *The Rings of Power* debuts.

"I think there's enough room at the fantasy table for everyone to eat, right?"

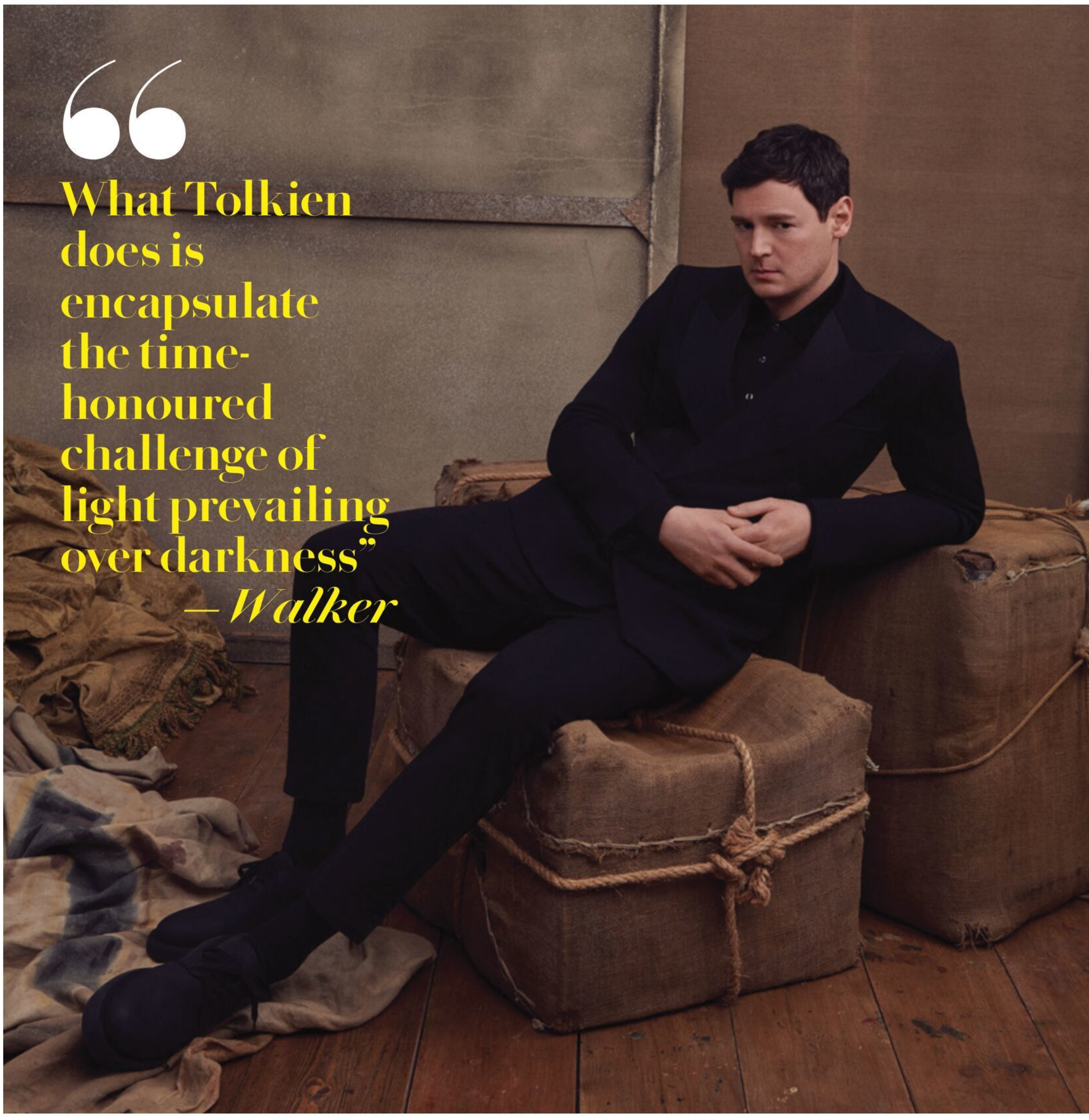
says Walker. "But what Tolkien does is encapsulate the time-honoured challenge of light prevailing over darkness, and the constant battle that requires. He drew from mythology, and his religious faith, and we in turn, as storytellers, are drawing from what he's done, and what other writers have taken and used from him. That's the cross-pollination of art. Plus I think fantasy is a beautiful place for people to escape these days."

Amazon, which paid the Tolkien Estate $250m for the rights, has committed to five seasons of the show, totalling 50 episodes. With the initial 10-part run coming in at $58m (plus change) per episode, it adds up to... well, let's just say it's a good job Jeff Bezos has deep pockets. Both Aramayo and Walker say they're in it for the long haul (which is just as well as, Elves being basically immortal, it would be tricky for the writers to bump them off). "It's not some kind of one and done endeavour," says Walker. "Amazon is invested in telling Tolkien's vision, and my job is to buckle up and go along for the ride."

A stand-up comedian as well as an actor, Walker has long been the toast of Broadway, playing opposite Scarlett Johansson in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and earning a Tony nomination for Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*. On screen, he's played the title role in *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*, co-starred with Chris Hemsworth in *In the Heart of the Sea*, and was the villain/love interest in the final season of Netflix/Marvel's *Jessica Jones*.

These days, home for the 40-year-old is London, where he lives with his English wife, actress Kaya Scodelario, and their two children. (America, he says, has become "the Wild West", and no place to raise kids.) When we speak, he's dealing with Britain's unnatural heatwave with his usual equanimity: "I grew up in a small town in Georgia [Cartersville], which has the kind of weather alligators like. So this is kinda refreshing for me."

Aramayo, 29, was born in Hull, and began his acting career with the city's fabled Truck Youth Theatre, before winning a place at the prestigious Juilliard performing arts school in New York. Post-*Thrones*, he's appeared in *Nocturnal Animals*, with Amy Adams and Jake Gyllenhaal, played Harley-Davidson co-founder William Harley for Discovery, and was recently seen in Netflix's batshit crazy – but wildly popular – thriller *Behind Her Eyes*.



No disrespect to that fine Yorkshire city, but Hull is – both geographically and spiritually – a long way from Hollywood. Does it ever feel slightly surreal, his unexpected journey from there to here? "Well, you can't beat Hull," he says. "But yeah, all this does sometimes feel very bizarre. I'm sure that's true regardless of where you come from, though."

Both actors have relished going beyond the scripts, and drinking deep from the original wellspring. "That's been one of the best parts of the job for me," says Aramayo. "Just diving into the legendaria, and realising there was all this other material that existed."

"For me, because I had that connection with my brother, I've really loved returning to it," agrees Walker. "If you're an actor and you're doing a play, you constantly return to the text. Every time you re-read it, you find something new in the writing."

The Rings of Power boasts a huge cast, including Morfydd Clark (*Saint Maud*, *His Dark Materials*), Peter Mullan, Joseph Mawle (another *Game of Thrones* graduate), Charles Edwards, and Sir Lenny Henry, who's playing a Harfoot (a type of early Hobbit). The bond between them strengthened into a real-life Fellowship as they shot the series in New Zealand during the coronavirus pandemic, having been granted an exemption to the strict travel ban that

MIDDLE MEN: Gil-galad (Walker) and Elrond (Aramayo)

helped to keep the country largely Covid-free. "We were just all together, cloistered, and it was a really unique amount of time, where we all grew quite close," says Aramayo. "I used to go to Ben's for Sunday lunch. I honestly don't think I'd have been able to get by without people like him."

"All I can say is I was very grateful to have this incredible job, in such an incredible country, and to be together during such a hard time for most of the people on the planet," says Walker. "New Zealand is such a gorgeous, stunning environment – to say nothing of the kindness and beauty of its people."

Not all the beauty we'll see on screen is natural. "On my first day filming with Rob, we walked into the sound stage, which was basically an empty airplane hangar," Walker recalls. "And all around us were what seemed like a couple of hundred thousand hand-painted, hand-cut silk leaves – on the ground, in the trees, just adorning the entire space. And you pick up one of these leaves, and you know that for each leaf there've been multiple meetings and conversations about the colour, the shape, the size... There are leaves that didn't make it! And now they're all scattered through the set, helping create this Middle-earth. You talk about the pressure, but I just look around at this army of artists and craftspeople and... it's humbling."

So part of your job is basically not to get in the way of the leaves? "Believe me, I've had worse direction than that in my time," he grins.

Naturally, with a property as cherished as this, there have already been rumblings online about the writers' plan to compress some of Tolkien's millennia-spanning timeframe. Something about which Walker, naturally, is sanguine. "That's not a bad thing, I want people to have opinions," he says. "I mean, we're not setting out to polarise. But the worst thing would be for someone to watch and say, 'OK, where are we getting dinner?'"

> **"It's not some one and done endeavour. Amazon is invested in telling Tolkien's vision; my job is to buckle up and go along for the ride"**
> — *Walker*

With depressing inevitability, there have also been complaints from the mossier corners of *Lord of The Rings* fandom about the show's diverse casting that some have labelled "forced", from the casting of Black actors as dwarves to the "woke rewriting of Tolkien into beta males and alpha females". To answer those people, says Walker, you just need to go back to the source: "Tolkien tells us that life requires effort to overcome the darkness, that evil is constantly hiding behind a corner. And all it takes is the unification of people – or elves and dwarves – to dry up the weeds. The point is to celebrate the work, and to celebrate one another. And anything other than that probably isn't really about the show."

Of course, it's not just *Game of Thrones* that people will be judging the show against: Peter Jackson's Oscar-hoovering movie trilogy dramatically raised the bar for any future Tolkien treatments. "Sure," nods Walker. "I love those movies. But, again, to do your best is the bare minimum. And that's what we're doing."

The dedication of everyone involved, from the showrunners to the guys cutting out those leaves, is a permanent source of inspiration, says Aramayo. "Every time you step on the set, they constantly wow you, whether they're creating something completely new, out of nothing, or turning a beautiful part of New Zealand into Middle-earth. At times, you really do feel like you're in another world."

And it's a world, both actors agree, that continues to exert an extraordinary pull on the human imagination, more than a century after John Ronald Reuel Tolkien dreamed up Middle-earth among the spires of Oxford.

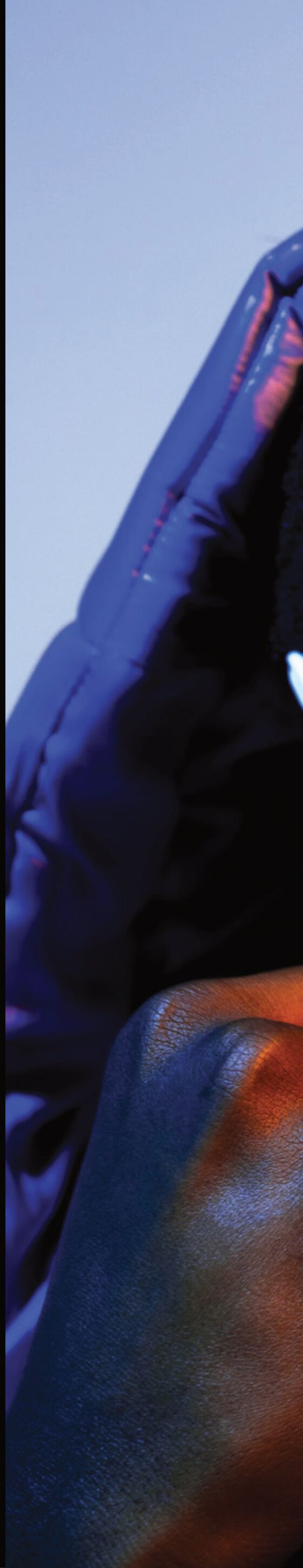
"It's interesting how earlier we referred to *The Lord of the Rings*, half-jokingly, as sacred texts," reflects Walker. "Because in a lot of ways, I think that's true. And not unlike how we're still going back to society's sacred texts and reimagining and reinterpreting them, so we're reinterpreting this, and allowing it to inform our lives as we change as people. The beauty of Tolkien is that it's so dense, so intricate, so detailed. To bring that to life... it's really an honour."

***THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RINGS OF POWER* IS ON AMAZON PRIME FROM 2 SEPTEMBER**

RAVE AND REMA

The Nigerian artist has created “Afro-rave”, his very own brand of Afrobeats, yet he claims to be merely part of a wider movement to bring African music to the West. As he prepares to stage his debut UK solo show in September, it’s clear that his ambition extends worldwide

BY JASON OKUNDAYE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHENELL KENNEDY
STYLING BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN



Despite famously singing "*I'm in love with plenty women*", Rema reports having no current romantic interests or any room in his life for dating at all. "I don't have time for it, I have a world to take," the 22-year-old says in an accent which seems to straddle Benin City and Atlanta. When you consider that his career is taking off, it's no surprise.

When we speak over a video call in June, the golden child of Afropop is resting after a heavy week of shows in Oslo and Geneva, and gearing up for a performance at London's Wireless festival in Finsbury Park. In September, Rema will perform his debut solo UK concert in London before setting off on a tour of the rest of the UK and Europe. Artists have greater creative licence when staging their own shows and this prospect excites him.

"It's full-on Rema," he says, his soft, low, humming voice breaking into bold intonation. "It's big for me, it's always been a dream. I feel like my fans out here in the UK, they have wanted this for a long while. I'm glad I'm going to be able to bring my own ideas and carry my full team on stage, including my band, because sometimes it's hard with all these festivals, based on the fact they have a lot of artists and need to make provisions for a lot of people."

Born Divine Ikubor, Rema grew up in Benin City, the capital of the fallen Benin Empire now located in Edo State, present-day Nigeria. Benin City has a rich history, famed for its bronzes, earthworks and powerful obas (rulers), but also for its varied religions, a feature which, Rema says, persists today. He notes how Benin — which he correctly pronounces "Bini" — is deeply spiritual. "It's a place in Nigeria where the traditional rule holds more ground than the government," he tells me. "There is huge diversity of religion. There are small communities with their own twist to the Benin language. Everyone knows each other, but everyone doesn't know each other. It's the culture which brings people together."

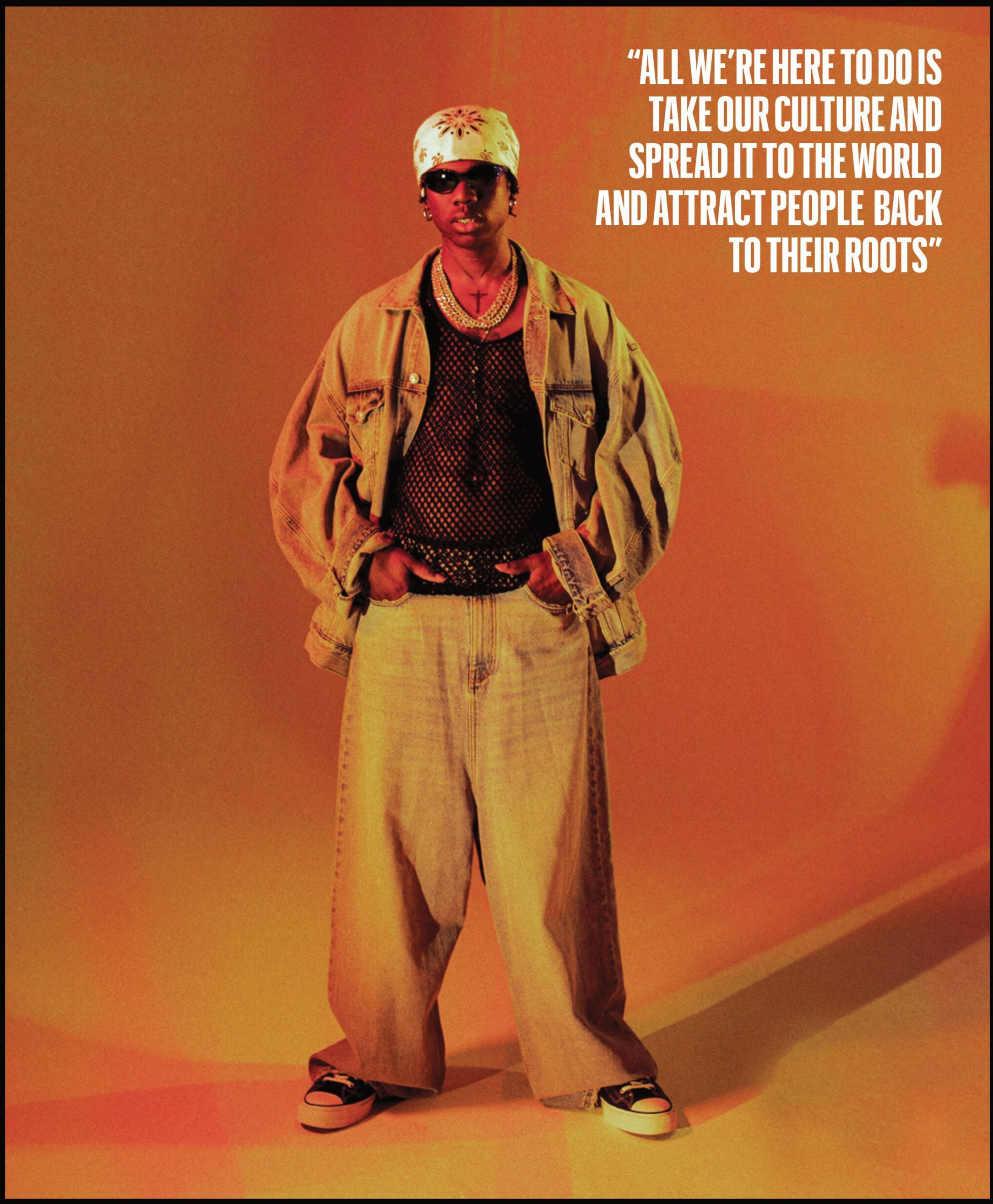
He also describes Benin as a place that is "fearful" of change, but which endowed him with a rich, intense education that he only became aware of once he left. Although he speaks nostalgically of growing up in the city, Rema left the capital for Ghana when he was 17 years old. "Things were tough in Benin," he explains, "I had to find bread for my family. I ran away from home because we were facing a lot of issues and I had to make ends meet."

He is reluctant to detail the problems that affected his family, but in 2008, his father, Justice, a politician in Nigeria's People's Democratic Party (PDP), was found dead in a hotel room in circumstances that are still unknown. This loss brought financial pressures for the family. In 2020, Rema called the party out, saying, "PDP, y'all need to explain what happened to my father in that hotel room. Justice Ikubor's son has risen." In the same year, Rema spoke out about his older brother dying years earlier due to negligence in the Nigerian healthcare system. Their deaths left him as "the only man, needing to do something", so he relocated to Ghana. Taking a break from music, he carried out hard labour.

Such turmoil would curtail the aspirations of even the toughest person, which makes it all the more remarkable that Rema has made such a success of himself and become a global name. With messianic zeal and gratitude, Rema reflects on the "timing" of his "come up", sharing that "God made it happen now, because I am so right for this time", as we discuss how Nigerian Afrobeats and Afropop music are currently dominating the charts as well as day parties and festivals in the West. At a day party like DLT Brunch, frequented by Black Brits in London, you could expect to hear Rema's 'Bounce' mixed alongside Wizkid's 'Anoti', Asake's 'Palazzo', and Burna Boy's 'Last Last'. It's enchanting, soulful music which sends hips swinging, booties low, and throws both gun fingers and gospel hands in the air. These are sounds which resonate across the African diaspora for their effortless linguistic blending of English, Yoruba, pidgin and, in Rema's case, Edo language. And the rapper feels that he's but one soldier working collaboratively as Afrobeat advances in its cultural domination of the West.

"It's a blessing. And never will I ever carry that competitive mindset," he asserts. "All we're here to do is take our culture and spread it to the world and attract people back to their roots. I'm grateful and I'm really

PREVIOUS SPREAD AND OPPOSITE: REMA WEARS JACKET BY BALMAIN, TOP BY TOMMY HILFIGER, BRACELET BY PAWNSHOP, ALL OTHER JEWELLERY AND WATCH (THROUGHOUT), REMA'S OWN



REMA WEARS JACKET AND JEANS, BOTH BY BALENCIAGA, TANK TOP BY RUFSKIN, BANDANA BY ASOS, SUNGLASSES BY OAKLEY, BRACELET BY PAWNSHOP, TRAINERS BY CONVERSE

proud of what the legends have done before me, and I'm graced by the fact that I'm also creating a fine ground for the next generation after me."

The increased popularity of Afrobeat music, however, does not mean that it is homogeneous — in fact, Rema is perhaps the truest testament to the diversity of Nigerian music. West African artists frequently encounter interrogations over their genre and comments that their music is 'unplaceable', but Rema has distilled his own sound into what he terms "Afro-rave". When I ask him to define it, he tells me to wait a moment while he retrieves a note on which he has written the definition. He then reads it aloud: "Afro-rave is my perception of Afrobeats, it's a sub-genre. It includes the melody, delivery and diversity and its flexibility to maintain its own stance, sound-wise, in any beats pattern and outside Afro. So yeah, that's Afro-rave."

It's a genre that wasn't immediate to the artist, as his journey through musical styles has been varied and plural. Looking back on his youth in Benin City, he remembers that he had neither a musical device of his own nor the money to purchase what he wanted to listen to, so he'd tune into what his family played. "My mum was big on gospel music, my sister was big on love songs, and also Michael Jackson, Wizkid, R&B, Drake," he recalls. "My brother used to listen to rap and Burna Boy and Davido – so African music. And my dad was big on legends like Osayomore, and also D'Banj and Don Jazzy, Two Face, Fela. So, I literally grew up listening to what everybody listens to."

When he began rapping and developing his own melodies as a teenager, he was first attracted to hip-hop, lo-fi music, and also a lot of rock songs that have since imprinted on his own discography. He turned to SoundCloud to be introduced to new forms of music and would "listen to whatever playlist my mood was feeling". He came across the likes of Daft Punk, Travis Scott and Kid Cudi. "I started to listen to a whole different field of music and started creating my own perspective, and then just kept going on from there.

"I listen to a lot of alternative music," he continues. "I don't know the names [of the artists], some of them just wrote two songs and then just [ghosted]. But when I was growing up, I couldn't know the words because I didn't have a device to play off of to know them, so I usually just hummed them, so that's something which influenced my music because I hum a lot in my songs."

Being a rapper, it wasn't obvious to Rema that he could melt his vocals over an Afrobeat sound, but when he was discovered and offered a record deal by D'Prince in 2018 after his Instagram post freestyling over the singer's 'Gucci Gang' went viral, Rema was steered towards this style. He now cites this as the "opportunity of a lifetime".

"He told me that he likes my voice, and he feels like I'm gonna sound really good on Afrobeat," says Rema. "I told him I don't really do Afrobeat, I just rap, so he said, 'Give it a try.' I was like, 'This is a mountain I have to climb.' I kept pushing myself, connecting my influences within. And I made a couple songs and kept going until I found myself, and that's it. That's how the Rema sound came out."

Although his success feels effortless now, Rema wasn't an overnight sensation — his achievements have been the result of plenty of trial and error. Today, Rema likens himself to an underdog who has beaten the odds to

TOP RIGHT: REMA WEARS DUNGAREES BY GUCCI X THE NORTH FACE AT MATCHESFASHION, TANK TOP, STYLIST'S OWN, BANDANA BY ASOS, BRACELET BY PAWNSHOP; BOTTOM RIGHT: REMA WEARS JACKET BY PALACE, BANDANA BY ASOS, BRACELET BY PAWNSHOP

become venerated and worshipped for his uniqueness. "At first it was quite funny, a lot of people laughed, a lot of people criticised, but I stood beside it, I kept going, I kept pushing. Right now, that criticism is a blessing to me: I stand out, I've distinguished myself. If I don't drop music for a year, it will be obvious in Africa that something is missing. That's how bold a statement my sound has made."

The infectious *Rave & Roses*, Rema's debut album released in March this year, certainly justifies the scale of self-belief. After a 2019 victory lap of three EPs, the full-length record has a youthful, cheeky, sun-dappled, atmospheric quality, conjuring images of boys running around the burnt orange, sandy streets of Nigeria. Much of it introduces listeners to Rema's life pre-fame, too. On 'Runaway', Rema touches on the pressures of pursuing romantic love in Benin City, where boys are hustling and economic anxieties anchor priorities. "*Many get money pass me die / But this my baby no dey collect all their bribe*", he sings. Dissecting the meaning of the track, Rema explains: "When I was in Benin, there was a standard that everyone had on relationships, and I felt the need to match up with that because at some point in time I'd be doubting myself or she'd be doubting the relationship — if she's with the right person and all. And it just caused that paranoia and anxiety, and I felt the need to run away, go somewhere else where we can just create our own narrative of love."

Love and its dreams and fantasies are laid out in each track like a divine, romantic offering. On 'Mara' he sings, "*Girl, you the reggae to my blues, baby / You be my booze*". Despite his earlier confession that he has no time for dating, it does not mean that his life is absent of love or that these themes are false advertisements within his music. Rather, love frames the entirety of his interactions, and both his personal and professional journey. Poetically, he speaks with anaphoras: "Love has played a lot of role in my life, love has been my drive, love has stood as something that grants me healing. Love has given me reasons to live. And it's not just about a girl, it's just in general, in life, team-wise, family, everything."

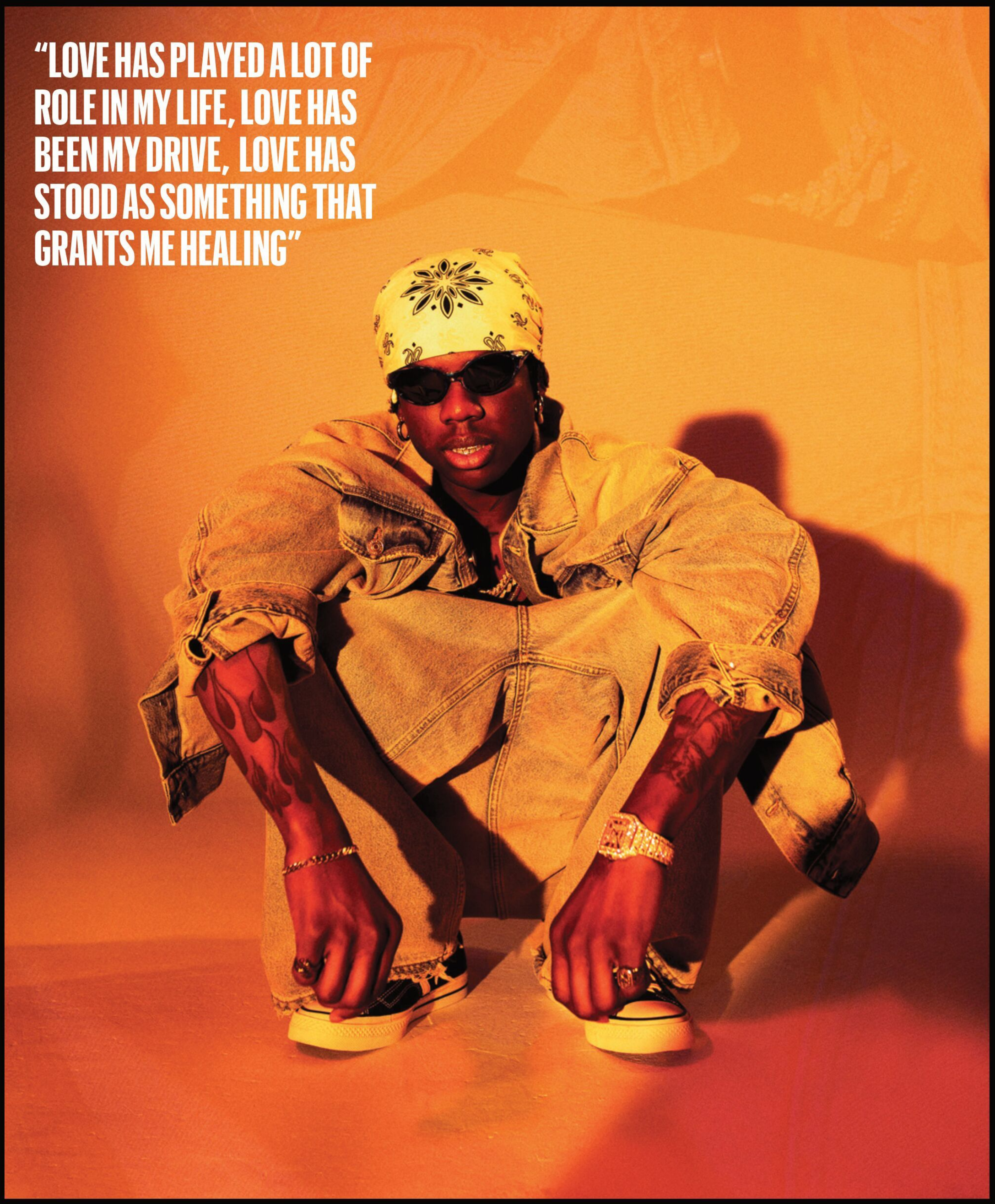
Compiling this album, then, was a curation of love songs, "When I step in the studio, I just do whatever I feel, and when I feel like all the different songs correlate with each other, I put them together and build them from there. That's how I created this project, it's mostly love-based, but it touches on other topics as well. It doesn't mean I'm a womaniser type; that's not my aspiration, it's just that love plays a huge role in my life. That's the push."

Rema feels that this album is like his 'child'. "It's very important to me and to Afrobeats and the new generation," he says. "I feel it's doing what it's supposed to do and this was the right time." Sensing that he is part of a broader shift, one that has been influenced by past generations and will shape the landscape for forthcoming artists, there is a cosmic faithfulness to Rema's words which is at once humble and confident.

He may just be speaking to a journalist on a video call, but it feels as though Rema is a million miles away — watching ocean waves crash, perhaps, or trees swaying in a rainforest. Or maybe he is staring into the night sky in awe and wondering at the world and its limitlessness. "I feel like it's high time the youths have something new to believe in, a new religion," he muses. "And I'm ready to take it up." ®

LEFT: REMA WEARS JACKET BY BALMAIN, TOP BY TOMMY HILFIGER, JEANS BY BALENCIAGA AT END., BRACELET BY PAWNSHOP, TRAINERS BY CONVERSE; OPPOSITE: REMA WEARS JACKET AND JEANS, BOTH BY BALENCIAGA, TANK TOP BY RUFSKIN, BANDANA BY ASOS, SUNGLASSES BY OAKLEY, BRACELET BY PAWNSHOP, TRAINERS BY CONVERSE; GROOMING: DAVID SESMERO AT GARY REPRESENTS USING DIOR BEAUTY; FASHION ASSISTANT: SACHA DANCE; LOCATION: BLUNDELL STUDIOS

“LOVE HAS PLAYED A LOT OF ROLE IN MY LIFE, LOVE HAS BEEN MY DRIVE, LOVE HAS STOOD AS SOMETHING THAT GRANTS ME HEALING”



WHAT DOES 'HYPERPOP' MEAN IN 2022?

Two years ago, the online DIY microgenre was the subject of countless articles, social media discourse and record industry bidding wars — but today, most of its artists reject the label. Where does the scene stand now that the hype has died down?

BY ANNA CAFOLLA

COMPRISED OF A rotating cast of figureheads, hyperpop artists make digital music pushed to its most flamboyant, most discordant, most spectacular extremes. Over the past two years, the microgenre has had a rapid proliferation, thanks to the runaway popularity of maximalist, mouthy scene birthers, 100 gecs. After zooming through digital superhighways like SoundCloud and Discord (where a small but engaged community proliferated), the microgenre was suddenly being written about in prominent publications and its artists were finding themselves on big playlists by Spotify and Apple Music (a corporatisation that the community passionately contests).

The hyperpop scene led to some serious opportunities for artists in its orbit. Musicians previously operating out of their bedrooms were now signing to major labels and performing sell-out tours, while pop critics were agonising over whether the microgenre had any chance of permanence or impact – a conversation that happened largely without the input of the aforementioned musicians.

Hyperpop spawned myriad memes and online arguments and, as it has metabolised into the mainstream music sphere, digital communities still spar over the genre's catch-all, reductive name, while the artists originally aligned with the scene resist and transcend its original definition. So where does the hyperpop scene stand in 2022?

KEY INFLUENCES

Although many of the hyperpop artists first profiled by mainstream publications were based in the USA, commentators have pointed to several key UK influences: the PC Music crew, with producer A.G. Cook as a godfather of sorts to an embryonic scene; pop mavens like Charli XCX; and underground-cum-pop-futurists like the late and great SOPHIE. The stratospheric rise of 100 gecs gave the genre a transatlantic moment, spreading across the world to catch critics' and platforms' burgeoning interests, as the race to name the new sound reached fever pitch.

Spotify launched its hyperpop playlist in August 2019, to much controversy, and before long a slew of younger, emerging artists and producers, who'd crafted their place in Discord channels and by uploading their glitchy music to SoundCloud, were getting recognised.

Early on, names like ericdoa, quinn, Alice Gas and others were among the most visible – young people with deep digital roots who made music in their bedrooms amid anxious lockdowns. Although the genre predated the Covid pandemic, lockdown gave it limbs. The music resonated with people shut inside and looking online, its fractured digital sound speaking to the dislocation of modern life.

The Spotify playlist compounded its reluctant birth into hypercritical analysis – a demand for categorisation and fervent internet discourse. Where previously these artists were drawn closer together by ideas and experimentation, the playlist created a framework and expectation for the genre: a set of rules for musicians to follow if they want to sound like 'hyperpop'.

Today, when the genre is mentioned by artists and critics, it tends to be ensconced in sardonic virtual air quotes. Some of the scene's most prominent figures have been divesting and distancing themselves from what has become a paradoxical, catch-all term imposed on artists who resist boundaries placed on their work.

So who has been claimed by the hyperpop 'colour wheel of doom', and who has moved to the digital pastures new of glitchcore, digicore, dariacore and other microscene names that percolate on SoundCloud, Discord and Reddit?

Previous page: (from left) BABii, Charli XCX and glaive; this page: (from top) Scottish musician SOPHIE was a hyperpop pioneer; A.G. Cook founded PC Music and is Charli XCX's creative director; Alice Gas's music has been streamed more than 10 million times on Spotify

"THE HYPERPOP SCENE HAS BEEN GRAPPLING WITH THEIR IDENTITY SINCE THEY FIRST GOT PLAYLISTED"
– MANNERS

Glenn McDonald's digital project Every Noise at Once finds and indexes the growing number of genres as they appear on Spotify. At the time of writing, there are 5,796 of them, ebbing from the esoteric into the stylish and continent-hopping: Swedish grindcore, filthstep, psychill. As streaming rose to become the dominant form of music consumption, with it came the tech platform algorithmic categorisation and, vitally, corporate branding.

"The industry loves definition, but the hyperpop scene has been grappling with their identity since they first got playlisted. It's easy for an A&R rep to ask, 'What's hyperpop?', and much harder to accept an answer that has little to do with genre," says Katie Manners, editor-in-chief of *Cat Scratch*, a publication and platform that has provided thoughtful critical analysis of the music category, as well as other global and digital microscenes. "Do it yourself until you don't. That's always been the nature of indie music scenes, and hyperpop is no different."

Digicore has since risen as an artist-led definition by disillusioned producers originally baptised as hyperpop. It's a scuzzier sound, and more community-orientated and artist-led, with collectives like Helix Tears (featuring midwxst, blackwinterwells, among others) abrasively pillaging video-game sounds and rap lyrics, as well as other genres like drill, emo and trance. "[Hyperpop is] a title that really does not apply to us... none of us make straight up 'pop' music at all," the musician d0llywood1 previously told *i-D*. "We're all digital kids who met each other on the internet, and so make music that *sounds* like shit we found on the internet... that's why 'digicore' is so perfect for us."

LOSING CONTROL

"I watched the [hyperpop] scene grow up alongside its artists – teenagers who spent their formative years trapped in quarantine – and splinter into digicore when everyone realised how much control they had lost," says Manners (some digicore artists are as young as 15; most are not above 20). "Hyperpop was born and bred under the watchful eye of Spotify's market researchers, not its artists. Digicore attempts

PREVIOUS PAGE, CENTRE: JACK BRIDGLAND; THIS PAGE: A.G COOK/SOUNDCLLOUD, ALICE GAS

to undo this, but there's only so much you can DIY when your community sits at the crossroads of the world."

So, hyperpop became a label for such a broad range of music and influences that it has lost much of its original definition and mission. umru, a 22-year-old musician from New York who is signed to PC Music and has worked with Charli XCX, Tommy Cash and Dorian Electra, has seen it in real time. "The exposure allowed some great opportunities for people who do really deserve it, but the ends don't justify the means... the power playlists and companies like Spotify can have over independent artists' careers is scary."

AN ELECTRONIC BILLBOARD in Times Square shouts "DIGICORE", a playlist in collaboration with SoundCloud and Pandora. Apple Music followed Spotify's hyperpop playlist with its own, titled 'glitch', repurposing a descriptor that's been used since the late 90s and early 00s. The playlist proclaims the sound of disruption and the future: "Welcome to Glitch, the definitive, neon-drenched alternate universe for playful outsider pop and PC-adjacent music," the website copy reads, including tracks from 'scene queens' like SOPHIE and Charli XCX, and "new rulebreakers" like phonewifey, ericdoa, and cookii.

ART OF NOISE: Producer umru is a key figure in the future sound of pop music

MOOD MUSIC

"The modern streaming service push of 'playlist culture' is designed to promote brands and vibes over artists," umru continues. "The fact that a playlist can be so much more infamous now than most of the artists on it sucks." umru points to what happened to artists originally categorised under the 'lofi hiphop beats' movement (one Spotify playlist has more than a quarter of a million followers) as a cautionary tale. "They can literally start replacing real artists on their playlists with fully Spotify-owned tracks and the listeners don't care because they've become fans of a 'mood' rather than the artists who originated the music," he adds. "I think the general driving force though for a lot of us is just not wanting to be boxed in as too experimental to be pop music, and not wanting to become a marketable brand for a streaming service's benefit."

Industry integration isn't the be-all, end-all for these artists, but label and mainstream engagement is far from resisted. Glaive, for example, is signed to Interscope. "As flawed as they are, there's a certain equity to online platforms where musicians with no external resources can still blow up simply because their music is good," says umru. "Personally, I feel like more and more I've been ending up in curator or A&R-type roles, bringing artists together who may not have otherwise – my project *comfort noise* is almost too packed with collaborators, but I've come to realise that's been just as important to my 'production' as creating the sounds, and it's honestly the most exciting part to me right now."

CORPORATE PROFITS

Stylistic dividers and internet-born genres move like memes, as Philip Sherburne writes in *Pitchfork*'s guide to 25 years of microgenres. Quickly, these are ripped from their roots for mass consumption and corporate profit. So have we exhausted the term hyperpop in 2022?

"I think there's always a need for genre descriptors even as many parties – from the artists who make the music, to the people who consume it – tend to reject them," says music writer Larry Fitzmaurice, who has followed the genre's formation and its artists' trajectories.

"It helps put music in some sort of context for listeners who aren't as invested in tracking every microshift in scenes, which is especially hard to do in the digital age."

Of course, this means placing faith in the responsibility of those who conjure these genres, and crowbar artists into corresponding boxes.

"Therein lies the issue," says Fitzmaurice. "Many times, those people simply cannot be trusted for whatever reason, and doubly so, when they are explicitly part of the business end of the music industry... I think that the interest in the artists has been fan-led, but the categorisation has been explicitly corporate – which makes sense, since corporations need to sell something and you can't sell something if it doesn't have a name."

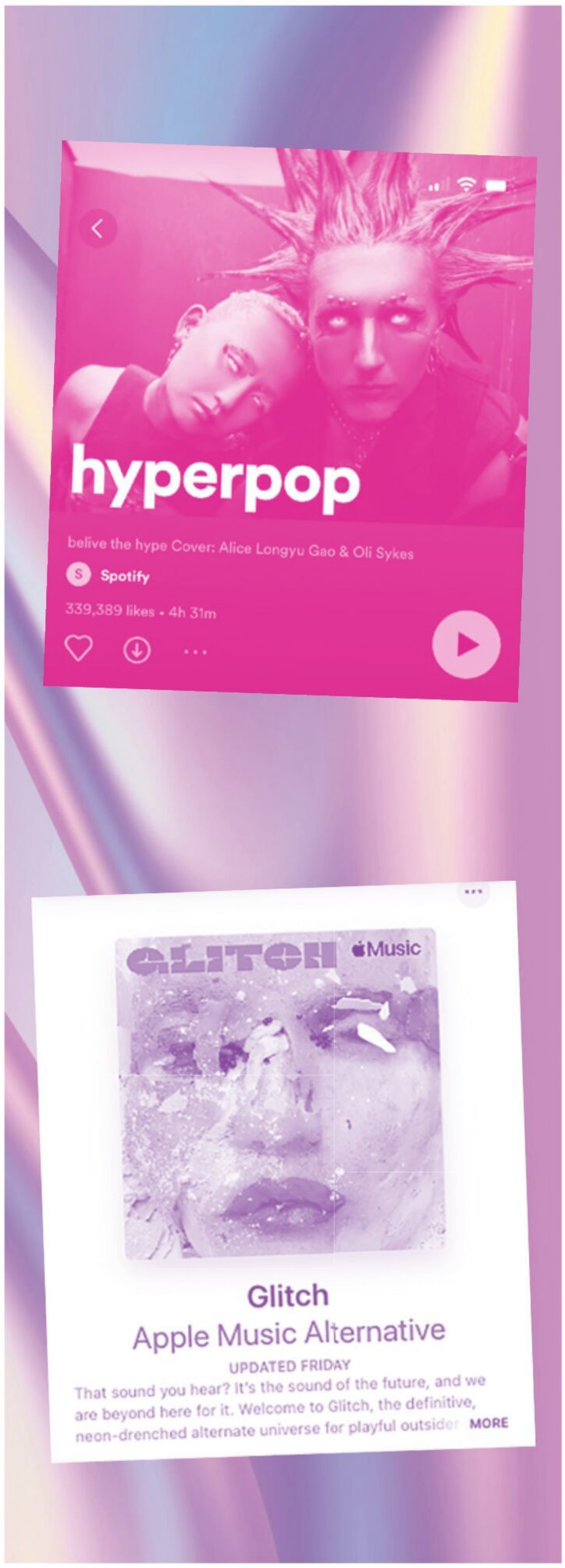
PIGEONHOLED

Online forums are fizzing with attempts by listeners to distil the sound and categorise artists. As a genre, it speaks to Generation Anxious and Extremely Online, grasping for community in defining years spent in lockdown.

"Most people who follow me are between 14 and 24 and so they're very young, which makes them more passionate for new music and discovering new sounds," says Bryson Peridot, who runs @hyperpopupdates on Twitter. "Discourse is inevitable when so many of us are terminally online, but I think some of the debates over artists' 'hyperpop-ness' can get unnecessary, and probably just make artists distance themselves further from the label."

Such is the case for the Australian artist daine, who has highlighted the "gatekeeping", bullying and cruel dissection of her work online.

Categorisations can have a positive effect on



(Top) Spotify's *hyperpop believe the hype* playlist was curated by experimental electronic duo 100 gecs; (above) Glitch is, according to Apple Music, "the definitive, neon-drenched alternate universe for playful outsider pop and PC-adjacent music"

"SOME OF THE DEBATES OVER ARTISTS' HYPERPOP-NESS CAN GET UNNECESSARY"

–PERIDOT

building and identifying communities and movements, but artists across the scene have voiced their frustrations at being pigeonholed in terms of what they can or should be creating, stunting a creative process or ability to move across genres as these very young artists should be allowed to do. Fitzmaurice points to the now defunct Black Dresses duo as an example of an act often affiliated with hyperpop, but who rejected the genre "in search of more abrasive, challenging sounds". Absconding from genre lines can often be the catalyst for exploring new ideas.

Artists once at the bedrock of hyperpop's base sound are innovating. Glaive is in the studio with Travis Barker and moving towards purer pop. Labelmate ericdoa no longer has to record on an Xbox USB microphone out of his bedroom, and some of his music features on HBO's *Euphoria*.

The sonic evolution goes in multiple directions. British artist BABii plays with hyperpop sensibilities – twinkly, distorted vocals and saccharine productions – but her lyrics reach a more vulnerable, fleshier centre on 2021 second album *MiiRROR*, with dark fantasy themes and a narrative based around her difficult childhood. Pop punk's influence is certainly there in daine's intimate lyrics, too, and heavier, electro-punk production. Midwxst's 2022 release *better luck next time* mashes catchy hooks from the Playboi Carti handbook with squelchy sounds of pop, trap and hip hop. A rising artist-defined genre, dariacore runs with a tongue-in-cheek take on big room EDM and Jersey club mashups.

Other artists use multiple pseudonyms, depending on their experimentation. Then there's collectives like helix tears and NOVAGANG, who feature artists of variously different styles and sounds, but find community with each other in their shared rejection of stylistic limits.

Rather than viewing hyperpop as a set of specific parameters, it is instead a toolkit and a methodology on which to build upon and expand. Whatever the tag or treatment, the realm of digital-led pop is a mutant, fraught democracy. As daine's Soundcloud bio plainly reads: "beyond form". ®

MUSIC BORN ON THE INTERNET

Whatever the tag or treatment, the realm of digital-led pop is a mutant, fraught democracy. Here here are some of the artists flexing some pixelated tentacles

BABii

Daisy Warne, aka BABii, dredges the depths of a chaotic childhood for her astute lyrics, and melds it to maximalist sounds that recall bubblegum bass and the comet-quick days of Rustie and Hudson Mohawke. The Margate producer plays with hyperpop sensibilities that are ever-present, but her work reaches an altogether more vulnerable centre in its themes and poetic, fantasy-led lyrical twists that explore her complicated relationship with her mother and other maternal figures. Last year's *MiiRROR* is a sour-candyfloss kick of dark, electronic pop. "*You left your tracks in the dirt where you left me*," achingly affirms her wispy, whispery vocals. There's a knack for world-building and scene-setting that goes beyond.

QUINN

A highschooler turned reluctant hyperpop prodigy, the anonymous 17-year-old from Baltimore, Maryland, blew up with the snarling and angsty 'i dont want that many friends in the first place' in 2020. First releasing under monikers including osquinn, the rapper, producer, and musician (and now deadAir records label creative director) defined the initial digital wave, appearing on the cover of the hyperpop playlist on Spotify.

Last year, she wiped any songs from her SoundCloud related to the hyperpop sound she'd crafted and retreated from social media. Emerging later, quinn propelled herself forward with a growing arsenal of production tools and lost the familiar vocals.

Her most recent compilation, *i'm going insane*, is a collage of raw emotions. There are echoes of her hyperpop-gone-by, but it's much more than that — it bounces into a body of work that continues to make new roots and mushroom out.

GLAIVE

The 17-year-old singer found music at the beginning of Covid and continues to be touted as one of hyperpop's most ascending acts and success stories. With the real name of Ash Gutierrez and living in North Carolina, he's an evolving artist who has funnelled new sounds and a scene through his screen to international acclaim — creating lockdown hits like 'stephany' during high-school classes on Zoom. But when asked which genre his music belongs to in a *New Yorker* profile earlier this year, he replied, "I'm just chilling."

The debut and breakthrough, *cypress grove*, is a brief but exciting introduction to his pulsating ecosystem of productions and influences. 2021's *all dogs go to heaven* EP, with his label backing, was recorded in an LA studio with new collaborators and one Travis Barker, and offers more room to experiment in discordant influences, with big room bass, pop punk and poppy maximalism shining through. It's a horizon-expanding thrill that speaks to what the teen can do outside four bedroom walls.

MIDWXST

"If quarantine hadn't happened, I truly believe hyperpop wouldn't have been created or as big as it is now. We all got in our bags and were pushing out great music," 17-year-old Edgar Sarratt III, aka midwxst, previously told *Dazed*. "I made more songs than I ever did — [quarantine] was a blessing and curse."

The Indiana-raised artist has, more and more, explored his sound in a way that feels refreshingly unselfconscious. 2021's *Back in Action* EP went in hard, with a respectfully formidable focus that discarded more angsty sonics of previous work in favour of pure rage rap.

better luck next time is a glorious 2022 release that combines all his sonic narratives — catchy hooks, connecting emo lyrics with hip hop and the more frenetic elements of pop and trap. It's this nimbleness and versatility that makes him a standout.

DAINE

The Filipino-Australian artist's presence is an ever-percolating topic of discussion on Reddit and Discord, where people try to define her sound and gatekeep her out of any hyperpop or HP-adjacent discussions. But she's keen to keep evolving.

daine melts inspiration from the Melbourne's hardcore scene in which she grew up to make a futuristic confection, leaning into the hyperpop sphere with the same tenacity as she does SoundCloud rap, hardcore and DIY punk.

The divergent sounds of 'boys wanna txt' and 'Salt' show off an alchemic sonic identity. If there's anything to call, it's that her amorphous brand of dainecore will get deliciously harder and heavier.

How Noah Cyrus Saved Herself

Photographs by Jessica Lehrman

By Julyssa Lopez

Growing up in public hasn't been easy, but she's got through the painful years

Noah Cyrus

Far West Farms,

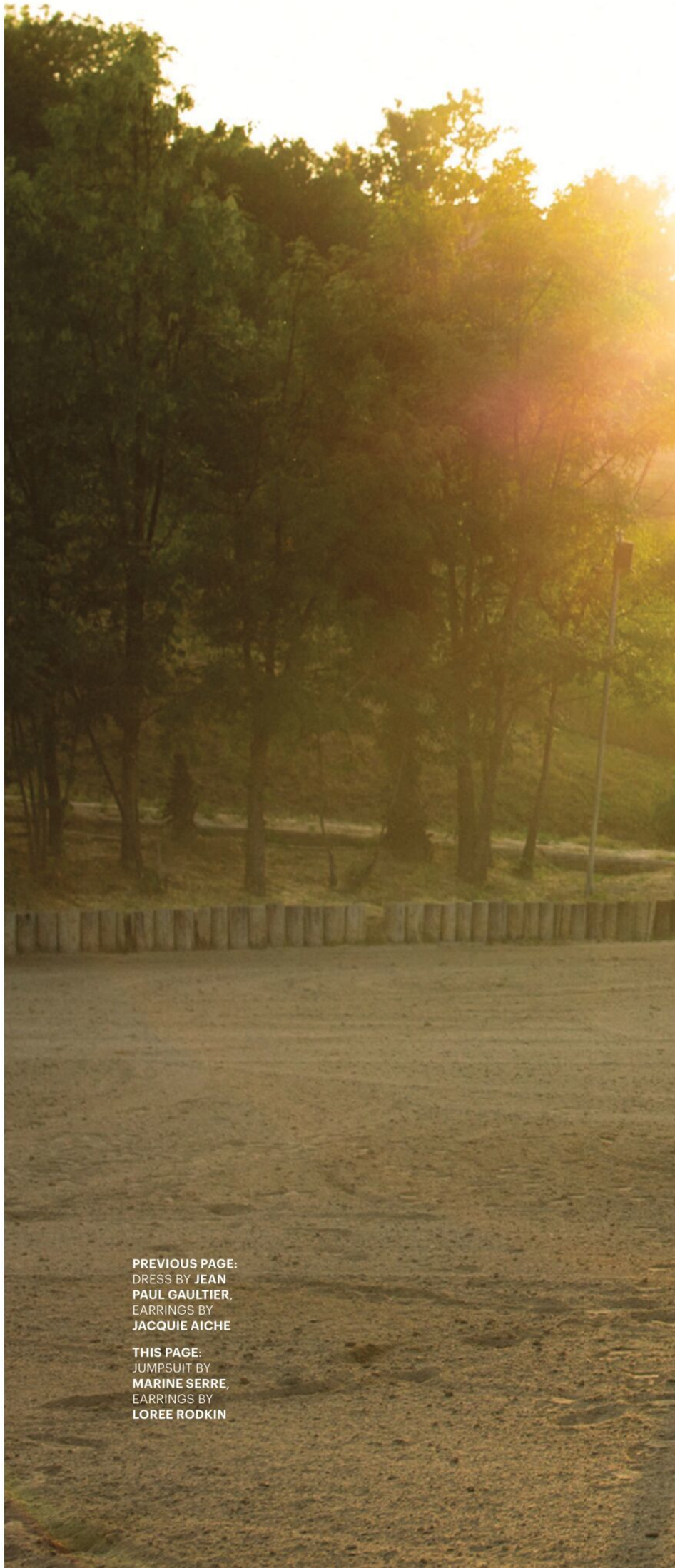
A BUCOLIC, family-run riding centre perched off a chalky street in Calabasas, California, takes some effort to find. If you're in a car, you wind your way down Ventura Boulevard and around anonymous office buildings, past the flower-strewn pet cemetery where Humphrey Bogart buried his cocker spaniel Droopy, through groves of bursting palms and spiky hedge plants. The reward, once you've made it, is a rush of silence. From the entrance of the farm, the perpetual roar of Route 101 and the anxiety of Los Angeles fade away, replaced with rustling trees and the occasional bray of a horse.

This has been Noah Cyrus's sanctuary since she was about 10 years old. She's been riding her entire life; one of her earliest baby photos shows her wearing a tiny red cowboy hat atop Roman, a towering, blue-eyed Appaloosa that her father, Billy Ray Cyrus, broke himself on his farm in Nashville – though not before Roman fractured one of the most famous noses in country music. "He bucked, dragged my dad through the mud," Noah says. "That was the love of my dad's life."

When the Cyrus family moved to Los Angeles in the mid-00s, Far West Farms owner Nick Karazissis – an amiable, award-winning rider now in his 70s – took Noah under his wing. "Tuesday through Sunday, every morning, I was here riding with him for about four hours a day, five hours a day. In the summer, it would be all day, every day," she says. Karazissis was calm and reassuring, a welcome force for the youngest kid in a sprawling showbiz family. "Obviously, I had a family that was split up a lot," she says. "Here I had something so permanent.... They would always make sure that when I came here I was Noah. I wasn't a Cyrus, I was just Noah."

More than a decade later, she still finds refuge at Far West Farms – and after a fraught couple of years, filled with aching losses and a substance-abuse problem she's only now opening up about, she's chosen to come here one Thursday afternoon in April to meet me. I hear her before I see her: a black SUV pulls up behind me, and I can only make out wisps of guitars trickling out of the sound system, mixing in with the clomp of horseshoes from the barn. Later, I find out she was blasting a cover of 'Sloop John B' that her dad recorded for his 2001 television series, *Doc*. Noah, who appeared on the show a few times as a cherubic toddler, has always loved the cover; she actually thought it was her dad's song for a while. Billy Ray recently sent her a new version he'd been fiddling around with at home. "He gets bored, so he threw on his own drums a few weeks ago," she tells me.

Noah arrives alone, dressed in a black hoodie and black sweatpants, her jet-black hair cascading past her waist. The curves of her face are instantly familiar; you can find traces of her parents or any one of her siblings in them if you look long enough. When she's excited, her Tennessean drawl tends to get stronger, and it warms up her voice as she takes me around the stables. She's carrying an apple in each hand for Fluffy, a Dutch warmblood belonging to Karazissis. She formed a special bond with Fluffy after Constantine, her longtime horse, whose name she has tattooed on her wrist, developed a baseball-size tumour in his stomach and had to be put down. Fluffy recognises Noah instantly as she walks into his stall and strokes his muzzle.



PREVIOUS PAGE: DRESS BY **JEAN PAUL GAULTIER**, EARRINGS BY **JACQUIE AICHE**

THIS PAGE: JUMPSUIT BY **MARINE SERRE**, EARRINGS BY **LOREE RODKIN**

DRESS BY **IRIS VAN HERPEN**, EARRINGS BY **STEFERE**

"I wake up in the mornings, and I'm able to look in a mirror and go on about my day without hating myself. I'm able to comfort myself and nurture myself"

"I always say feeling something in the palm of your hands is the closest you can really be to something," she says, her hand moving down his neck. "It's just feeling the way they're breathing and the heartbeat and how you can connect to each other." She shares an old saying that her late grandfather Ron Cyrus, who served in Kentucky's House of Representatives for 11 consecutive terms, was fond of: "The outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man."

Lately, Noah has been focusing on what's good for her, taking each day slowly. Since late 2020, she's been in recovery from an addiction to Xanax, the benzodiazepine medication often prescribed for anxiety or panic attacks. After spiralling into a pattern of drug abuse, she got help – six months before she started pouring everything into her debut LP, *The Hardest Part*. Although the music was soldered in pain, what stands out is Cyrus's sense of grace and composure as she blends polished country pop and folk sounds, as woodsy and pristine as the inside of a walnut. The album is understated, even when it's capturing the darkness that almost shattered her.

Three months into recovery, Cyrus met Mookie Singerman, a musician turned manager who used to front the Poughkeepsie, New York, metal band Genghis Tron, and who also manages indie wonder girl Caroline Polachek. After becoming Cyrus's manager, he put her in a room with Mike Crossey, the Northern Irish producer with a credit list that includes the Arctic Monkeys, The 1975, and one of Cyrus's favourite artists, Ben Howard. She and Crossey would wake up early in the morning and cross off tasks on a whiteboard – vocal takes, percussion arrangements, guitar additions – to build every song. Each day was a step closer to finishing the album, another day Cyrus stayed focused, grounded and healthy.

"It gave me so much structure in the time that I really needed structure, because I didn't want to just be sitting around and stirring in my brain," she says. "It gave me hope."

"WHEN I TURNED 20, I was overcome / With the thought that I might not turn 21 / Death upon my doorstep, if I took just one more step / There'd be nothing left of me except these songs..."

Those lines can knock a person sideways, and they're how Cyrus chose to open her album. They come from 'Noah (Stand Still)', a ballad that laces together gentle fingerpicking and Cyrus's piano melodies, before building into an emotional crescendo. She'd shared an early demo with Crossey when she first met him in his Culver City studio. "I was blown away right out the gate with the songwriting," he says. Her lyrics were intimate and fearless. "That was what struck me right away – the vulnerability and the honesty. She's talking about very personal things in her life, and she's done it in a way where they're beautiful songs."

Cyrus has tracked her battles with anxiety and depression in her music before. Her first EP, *Good Cry*, from 2018, was a mix of moody, minimal alt-R&B that was honest about the loneliness and heartbreak she was feeling at the time. She followed that up in 2020 with *The End of Everything*, an EP that was more experimental but just as searing, with songs such as 'Lonely' and 'July' touching on mental health and toxic relationships. The project got attention – an updated version of 'July' with Leon Bridges cracked the Hot 100 – and later that year, she received a Grammy nomination for Best New Artist. Following the nomination, Cyrus teamed up with the Australian singer-songwriter PJ Harding for *People Don't Change*, a set of six songs that deepened her catalogue with themes of loss and spirituality.

Although Cyrus was always interested in music, what she wanted growing up was to "be a normal kid": "I had a really hard time being a part of a public family, and I struggled a bit with that, because it wasn't exactly my first choice." Her high-profile family attracted even more fame when her older sister Miley Cyrus became one of Disney's biggest stars on the show *Hannah Montana*, which ran for much of Noah's childhood, from about age six to 11. "I had a hard time with people coming up to me and saying, 'Are you Miley Cyrus's little sister?' or 'Are you Hannah Montana's little sister?' I did not like that, and it stripped me of my own identity for a long time." Sometimes, she says, if people asked, she'd just answer no. As she started going through puberty, she developed body dysmorphia, something that was only exacerbated by the pressures of public life. She battled depression, and a light she felt she carried as a kid got pushed down, deeper and deeper.

When she was 18, she tried downers for the first time. "My boyfriend at the time, when I was 18, was the first person that gave me a Xanax, and it became a way for us to bond," she says. "I think I wanted to fit in with him. I wanted to be what he wanted and what he thought was cool and what I thought everybody was doing." Party drugs like Molly had never been her thing. This was different. "Once I felt that it was possible to silence things out for a second and numb your pain, it was over," she says.

Cyrus's struggle with Xanax coincided with just how ubiquitous benzos and other prescription drugs have become in pop culture over the past several years, especially in music. Songs that list out contents of entire medicine cabinets have spiralled off into mini genres of smooth Xan-rap and lethargic pill-pop, striking a chord with a younger generation.

But the rise of benzos has also had deleterious effects in the US, a country that is still in the grips of a deadly opioid epidemic. In 2020, 16 per cent of overdose deaths involving opioids there also involved benzodiazepines. Although a Xanax prescription can be safely used to treat anxiety and panic attacks, some artists have been open about their experiences misusing the drug: Chance the Rapper, Justin Bieber,

FASHION DIRECTION BY ALEX BADIA; PRODUCED BY BRITTANY BROOKS; STYLING BY BRETT NELSON FOR THE ONLY AGENCY; MARKET EDITOR: EMILY MERCER; HAIR BY LAURA RUGETTI FOR THE ONLY AGENCY; MAKEUP BY DAVID VASQUEZ; LOCATION: FAR WEST FARMS, CALABASAS, CALIFORNIA

and Lil Xan – someone Cyrus dated at one point, and whose entire artistic moniker is a reference to Xanax – are among those who have talked about recovering from abusing the sedative. Other tragedies have underscored the dangers of benzos: in 2017, the emo-rap heartthrob Lil Peep nodded off after taking a lethal combination of fentanyl and Xanax, and died at age 21.

To Cyrus, a big part of the problem was how accessible the drug was. "I was surrounded by people who were easily able to get it by buying it from people," she says. A few of her friends at the time bit back comments about her drug abuse and "kind of cosigned it" she says. What started recreationally morphed into a bleaker habit. "It just kind of becomes this dark, bottomless pit," she says. She'd sleep all day and wake up at 8 pm. She didn't know which day was which, and her memory was slippery and unreliable. By the time the pandemic hit in 2020, her substance-abuse problem was at its worst.

That entire year was chaotic. The lowest and most alarming moment came during an international television interview: Cyrus was doing press after releasing *The End of Everything* in May, and she started to pass out mid-conversation. "I was completely nodding off and falling asleep, and unable to keep my head up or keep my eyes open, because I was so far gone," she says. (The interview never aired.) The loss of her grandmother, Loretta, in August of that same year was a bitter wake-up call. Cyrus didn't really get a chance to say goodbye, and she wonders if she would have picked up the phone more often had she been more present. "I felt so guilty for not being there when my grandma died. I was there physically, but emotionally, I was not there. I couldn't be," she admits. It also weighed on her that she'd shut herself off from her mother, Tish Cyrus, who was grieving. "That was my big eye-opener: I was sitting alone, and I was scared, and I realised that all the people that I love and all the people that I need, I was the one pushing them away," Noah says. More turmoil came that December, when she ignited a social media firestorm after she used a racially insensitive word to describe the conservative pundit Candace Owens on Instagram. (She's deeply apologetic: "It's something that I'm just sorry for, that I could have possibly hurt people that I respect and a community that I respect and I love.")

Cyrus won't go into detail about the first few months of her recovery process; she only says that it was a delicate time. "I was being helped by everybody that I needed help from, and it took some time to get on my own two feet," she says. A game changer, she feels, was meeting Singerman and slowly wading into the creative process: "Mookie brought so much hope into my world, and so much care and compassion for me and my situation." Music became the best kind of catharsis for her, and although she had some trepidation about sharing what she was going through, she almost couldn't avoid it. "It was coming out in my lyrics," she says. "So, it's like, 'I'm not going to hide my truth.' I think it was evident that I was going through something the past couple years – I think my fans saw it. I think the public could see it." She wanted to take the reins and tell the story herself.

"Noah had a really strong sense of what she wanted," Crossey says. Her writing is rooted in the classic country and folk artists she loves, like Kris Kristofferson and Terry Jacks, and she guided the arrangements to sound timeless and minimal, yet unexpected. On the title song, 'The Hardest Part', it was her idea to keep the percussion rhythm stripped back; on 'I Burned LA Down', she wanted the drums just a little offbeat and out of the pocket.

Her friend PJ Harding has told her that he hears a lot of her in the music. "I think he means, 'Everywhere, there's pieces of you,'" she says. That intimacy comes through especially on 'Loretta's Song'. She wrote that one as a tribute to her grandmother, but also as a gift to her mother – a eulogy and gentle consolation that's helped her make amends with some of the losses in her life the past few years.

THERE'S A MEMORY from 2019 that appears twice on the album, on 'Noah (Stand Still)' and 'The Hardest Part'. It was around Christmastime, and Cyrus went to visit her dad in Nashville. Her struggle with substance abuse had intensified, but she says most people still hadn't realised how bad things had become. That day with her dad, though, was haloed in joy. They spent the day riding four-wheelers and walking around the farm together. He pushed her on an old rope swing she used to play on as a kid, and they talked about different things – her childhood, her grandfather. But a sadness clung in the air. "Obviously, it was made public knowledge that my parents had been through some rough patches," she says. (Billy Ray and Tish filed for divorce in April this year – not for the first time.) "It felt like there were words that we both had to say but just couldn't say it."

The Hardest Part isn't just Cyrus processing her journey with addiction. It's also reconciling many of the relationships around her. One of the most pulverising moments on the album is 'Every Beginning Ends', with Ben Gibbard from Death Cab for Cutie, a band Cyrus fell in love with because of her older sister Brandi. She and Gibbard had been talking about the dissolution of past relationships – when one person stops putting the effort in, when the laughter fades. "I relate to that in many ways, not only with me, but also just with my parents' relationship," Cyrus says. "Writing about that gave me more understanding."

Gibbard says he didn't know what to expect from Cyrus, but he was floored once they met in Seattle and began putting the song together, line by line. "I kept coming back to it and just basking in her brilliance," Gibbard says, comparing her writing style to his friend Jenny Lewis's. "It's easy to be mysterious. It's easy to be aloof. It's easy to be cool. It's so much harder to be earnest, and it's so much harder because she's really opening herself up with a lot of these songs."

Celebrities who open up about addiction are often expected to become role models or figures of empowerment. Cyrus knows she doesn't have all the answers, and says that she just wanted to share her experience with her fans, in case it helps them get through their own hardships. "I'm not trying to be, like, any spokesperson for recovery or anything like that," she says. "I, myself, am just going through it and figuring it out."

These days, Cyrus's world is a little quieter, with hours dedicated to therapy and psychiatry and a lot of time at home with her dogs, Mellow and Marshall. "I wake up in the mornings, and I'm able to look in a mirror and go on about my day without hating myself," she says. "I'm able to comfort myself and nurture myself."

A text thread called Hotline Siblings helps her check in regularly with her brothers and sisters, and she goes to Nashville often to see her baby nephew, Bear. She's close to her mother, and her dad calls her constantly, blasting her album through his speakers and playing along on guitar.

Cyrus still has complicated feelings about her fame: "I don't look at it as, in 10 years, I have to be the world's biggest superstar."

Right now, she is feeling unbound. She has thought about doing a deluxe release of *The Hardest Part,* maybe with an a cappella version of 'I Burned LA Down', or shaving down the pop-oriented ballad 'Unfinished' to just an acoustic guitar.

She's even sent a few music videos in which she's riding horses to Karazissis at Far West Farms. "He's always commenting how proud he is of himself for teaching me such beautiful equitation," she says, laughing. Just like that ranch, her music has become one more place where she's found peace. ®

LOOK BY **ELENA VELEZ**,
SHOES BY **PLEASER**,
EARRINGS BY **LOREE RODKIN**

Hard Knox

A new book explores the surprising and previously unexplored territory of self-injury in culture and entertainment. In this extract from* Which as You Know Means Violence, *art critic Philippa Snow discusses the adolescent, self-destructive harm of* Jackass*'s Johnny Knoxville, alongside writer Hunter S. Thompson and filmmaker John Waters

THREE WEEKS BEFORE he died, Hunter S. Thompson left a message on the answering machine of another, less literary all-American counter-cultural fuck-up: Johnny Knoxville, the man best known for his role in the creation of the television series and film franchise about self-injury, *Jackass*, and less known for a career in Hollywood that peaked with an unedifying film based on the 80s show *The Dukes of Hazzard*. Thompson, the genius gonzo journalist whose mythic drink and drug consumption and percussive, breakneck prose occasionally overshadowed a keen eye for the particulars of politics and sport, had recognised a kindred spirit in the cocky, Kentuckian stunt *artiste* after the two of them went on an all-night bender in September

MOVIESTORE COLLECTION LTD / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Madison

PLEASURE AND PAIN
Previous page: Knoxville in the infamous baby alligator scene from *Jackass: The Movie;* this page (above): Philippa Snow analyses the use of self-injury to amuse in *Which as You Know Means Violence*

2005, in New Orleans. Knoxville, who for some mysterious reason cast aside his Pynchonian real name, P.J. Clapp – an appellation that seemed tailor-made to fit a stunt performer in a circus – in favour of a salute to his home state, had idolised Hunter S. Thompson more or less since adolescence. By the time they spent that night together in Thompson's hotel room, drunkenly, bromantically reading selected passages from his Hawaiian odyssey *The Curse of Lono* to each other, Johnny Knoxville had become extremely famous, a putative redneck playboy whose idea of play was hazardous, extending to the kind of fun and games where somebody is apt to lose an eye. Magazines, noting his sharp-toothed, wolfish grin, likened him to a young Jack Nicholson – a comparison that would doubtless have pleased most men, but which would not have lived up, in Knoxville's eyes, to being the heir to Thompson's title as the sickest, most erratic documentarian of American life ever to earn the status of a household name.

In his very early 20s, Knoxville filmed a segment for the cult skate magazine *Big Brother* in which, standing in a neat suburban garden that seemed certain to belong to someone's mom, he sprayed himself with Sabre Red, shocked himself with a 120,000-volt electric taser, and then drove out to the desert to put on a bulletproof vest and shoot himself with a .38 calibre Smith and Wesson at immediate range. The footage, rough and un-reconstituted as a snuff film, is at once a prototype for the aimless and unavailing self-destructiveness of early *Jackass,* and an accidental echo of a number of prominent 70s body art performance videos, most notably Chris Burden's *Shoot*. Knoxville, who can be heard being called P.J. by off-camera friends – "P.J., it's done," one of them says, although he might also be saying, not wholly inaccurately, "P.J., it's dumb," – introduces himself in one languorous breath as "Johnny Knoxville, United States of America," as if he were not a man at all, but an extremely scruffy metaphor: a walking, talking, self-abasing national id. Mailing the video to Thompson, he had been surprised to receive an encouraging phone call in response. A little later, the two met for the first time, fleetingly, at the Viper Room, the younger man admitting to having been "footloose, and a little overzealous" – an uncool and eager novice in the presence of a master. "He suspects," *GQ* reported, perhaps underestimating how difficult it would be to perturb Hunter S. Thompson, "Thompson told his handlers to 'keep that guy away from me.'"

Evidently, if Thompson felt any revulsion for the neophyte stunt actor, he renounced it over time; the sins of the father, when it came to bad behaviour, far outweighed those of the son. The two men shared a proclivity for some things – large quantities of alcohol, illegal and dangerous fireworks, lurid tiki shirts, and a very specific style of aviator shades that looked on Knoxville like a white-trash pastiche made by Gucci, and on Thompson like the glasses of a pervert – and a disdain for some others – personal safety, formal dress codes, what might loosely be referred to as The Man – and they were altogether two peas in a pod, in Thompson's mind, when it came to possessing something called "freak power". Knoxville repeated that message from his answerphone to an interested journalist in 2005, putting on "a scratchy Dr. Thompson voice". That he appeared to remember the words verbatim was evidence of his awe, a lasting sense that he had somehow been inducted into greatness. "Johnny," Thompson had reportedly informed him, "we were just sitting here talking about you, and then we started talking about my needs, and what I need is a 40,000-candlepower illumination grenade. Big, bright bastards, that's what I need. See if you can get them for me. I might be coming to Baton Rouge to interview [imprisoned former Louisiana governor] Edwin Edwards, and if I do I will call you, because I will be looking to have some fun, which as you know usually means violence."

"Some people get rich, and others eat shit and die"
— *Hunter S. Thompson*

"Fun", for most people, does not usually mean violence. It is difficult to say what makes a person see the world the way Hunter S. Thompson did, except to guess that it may have something to do with an extreme attunement to the dark vibrations of a certain kind of American life, a folk song pitched at a dog-whistle that could only be detected by those who self-identified as outsiders. "What do you say," he had written in the 80s, ruminating on

LAURA COOPER

the dual threats of the spread of HIV and acid rain, "about a generation that has been taught that rain is poison and sex is death? If making love might be fatal and if a cool spring breeze on any summer afternoon can turn a crystal-blue lake into a puddle of black poison right in front of your eyes, there is not much left except TV and relentless masturbation. It's a strange world. Some people get rich, and others eat shit and die."

Knoxville, born in 1971 – the same year Chris Burden made *Shoot* – certainly belonged to the generation Thompson was describing, making it entirely fitting that he and his *Jackass* cohort would get rich by masturbating, eating shit, and almost dying on a television show watched by 2.4 million viewers. Bloody, dumb, aggressive, screwy, simultaneously masculine and childlike, drenched in vomit and in semen, it is strange to think of *Jackass* having first aired in 2000 in light of its nihilistic attitude to modern American manhood, life and work – it too obviously resembles a post-9/11 show, with its giddy violence sometimes mirroring the helpless, hopeless mania that follows serious trauma. Notionally and geographically, it exists halfway between Venice Beach and Never-Never Land, making its bloodied knees and noses feel like natural by-products of its arrested, unpoliced environment. (Lest we forget: in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, it is heavily implied that Peter murders his Lost Boys when they commit the crime of starting to reach puberty.) Its approach to injury is near-balletic, each sketch an elegant *pas de deux* or *trois* or *quatre* or *cinq* in which agony, and not ecstasy, is paramount. The pain – its white-hot, cattle-branding brilliance – is the point. The celerity of its pacing, fast and hard and engineered to appear loose, echoes the structural integrity of, say, the greatest hits of the Ramones: a pummelling, driving rhythm, built to induce something like an amphetamine rush, as carefully constructed as the sugariest single by a Spector girl group.

WRESTLING WITH FAME
Knoxville in *Jackass Number Two*, which was released in 2006 and starred the regular cast of the TV series

"Agony, and not ecstasy is paramount. The pain – its brilliance – is the point"

PARAMOUNT/COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION

Early in its debut season, a baby-faced Johnny Knoxville can be seen wearing a shock-collar for dogs with his Ramones shirt, his incongruous prettiness lending him the unlikely air of a 00s stoner dropout who has been abruptly dropped into a punky, prankish remake of *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*. "We're going to convince [sound engineer Rick] Kosick that this is a piece of audio equipment," he says straight into the camera, his tone as temperate and chill as if this were not an assault, but an experiment. "Unbeknownst to him, *he's gonna get shocked*." The way he says these last four words – his Southern-fried Tennessee accent turned up *just so* and feminised roughly 25 per cent, so that he sounds a little like Vivien Leigh as Blanche DuBois – unwittingly cements the mood of *Jackass* as a Freak Power franchise: an 18-hour fuckaround whose target audience had been young, disaffected men who wanted to watch *other* young and disaffected men affixing mouse traps to their nipples. The men of *Jackass* were frequently, nakedly homoerotic; they were dorky, skinny, more like boys who would be bullied than the alpha males most often seen meting out punishment. Knoxville's crew included Ryan Dunn, Bam Margera, Jeff Tremaine, Brandon DiCamillo, Raab Himself, Steve-O, Preston Lacy and Ehren McGhehey, as well as a host of other daredevils with smaller parts, none of them leading men or heartthrobs, all of them cheerfully, grungily fatalistic. These men loved each other madly and fraternally, occasionally kissing, their desire for proximity appearing to arise from the muddling of terror and eroticism inherent in being made aware of one's mortality – what the art critic Leo Steinberg described as "the condition of being both death-bound and sexed". When the lawyers at MTV began suggesting that they could no longer perform stunts that seemed to risk their lives, they grew rebellious, migrating to a medium in which violence is and always has been less taboo than sex, hard drugs, political subversion, or the presence of non-white or unconventionally attractive leads: the movies.

"Fiction," Hunter S. Thompson once told an editor at Knopf, "is a bridge to truth that journalism can't reach." The *Jackass* films – a slickly made quaternary franchise whose second instalment is, of course, called *Jackass Number Two* – are not narrative so much as expressionist: long runs of sketches that intentionally or otherwise gesture at a bigger, more incendiary message about what it means to be a young man in America beset by the psychic indignities of economic downturn, terrorism, unemployment, hopelessness about one's place in an increasingly dysfunctional society, and distant, quietly raging war. In the first movie, Knoxville rents a mid-range family car, pointedly choosing one whose paintwork is as white as untouched snow, and takes it to a smash-up derby, saying when he hands the car back by way of apology that he quite often "drink[s] and just black[s] out". Later, a far less

UPPING THE ANTICS
It was inevitable that the *Jackass* TV show, with its regular audience of 2.4 million, would lead to a movie spin-off. *Jackass: The Movie* (above) was released in 2002

substantial car – a Hot Wheels toy – is inserted into Ryan Dunn's backside, the setup for a gag about a druggy frat-house orgy gone awry. In the second *Jackass* film, Bam Margera has his ass-cheek branded with a cartoon penis by a sullen cattle rancher, and a nervous Knoxville dons a sailor outfit to wrestle with anacondas in a ball pool as the soundtrack plays the 1981 single by Josie Cotton, 'Johnny, Are You Queer?'. (Subtext, by this point, has become sniggering text.) What many of the set-ups have in common is a dark 'n' dumb, seditious take on traditional masculinity – the racecar driver, the cowboyish cattle rancher and the US navy man, all filtered through the sensibility of boy outsiders, never quite sturdy enough to make the team.

Hollywood, a metonym not only for the movie industry but for all things that are too good, too convenient or too bombastic to be real, seemed like the funniest place for these supposedly rough-edged and redneck daredevils to be performing stunts without protection, safety nets or training. Rarely has a cultural product felt more of the suburbs than the original run of *Jackass,* its dirtbag performers never looking like anything ritzier or more polished than a pack of local skaters who congregate in the car park at a mall. "We're always trying to build a utopian society," Peter Mascuch, the chair of cinema studies at New York's St. Joseph's University, once said in an interview with *Newsweek*. "And for the baby boomers, suburbia became that utopia. The flip side is the utopia never lived up to its promise. People became disenchanted, and then they react[ed] to that with critical and dark depictions." A suburban adolescence, in other words, may have been a contributing factor in the *Jackass* boys' desire to take aim at America by taking aim at each other's tenderest parts: Gen Xers born into the failed utopia Mascuch describes, their depiction of the status quo was fated to be dark. "If this isn't cultural terrorism," the provocateur-auteur John Waters wrote in *Artforum* of *Jackass Number Two*, in which he had a minor cameo dressed as a rinky-dink magician, "I don't know what is." Ultimately, *Jackass* fitted into Waters' legacy as snugly as a Hot Wheels car into a stunt performer's rectum.

"Why do I love it? Am I addicted to it? Is it coming from a good place"
— *Knoxville*

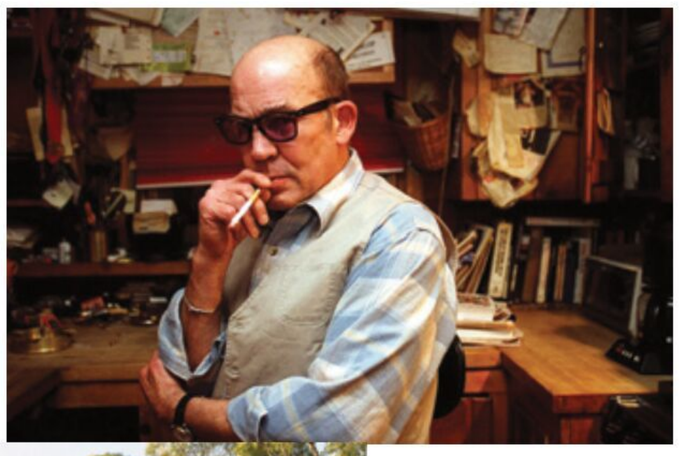
John Waters' championing of *Jackass* is not terribly surprising – nobody will ever be as inextricable from the idea of eating shit, however many times the men of *Jackass* did so literally or figuratively. In 2004, Waters cast Knoxville in what has, to date, been his last theatrically released motion picture, also set in suburban America, a grossout comedy about a group of uptight, small-town prudes who hit their heads and end up turning into nymphomaniacs, fulfilled its purpose by being seen by almost no one; one last funny, filthy provocation from an offbeat national treasure. Playing Ray-Ray, a sex-fiend mechanic with a self-professed "hard-on of gold", Knoxville achieves the balance every good John Waters actor hopes to attain in a leading role: a queasy mix of sex appeal and pure revulsion. The film did not end up heralding a move into the arthouse for the stuntman; what it did show was that Waters had identified his most sensual and insoluble quality, a merging of haute American masculinity and knowing, playful deviant drag, underpinned by what was apparently an interest in high culture. "Johnny is great; he's a sweetheart," Waters told an interviewer from a New Zealand newspaper in 2011. "He's sensitive and funny." Knoxville's willingness to, say, wrestle in horseshit seemed at odds with his avowed love of the French New Wave and Flannery O'Connor. (Ernest Hemingway, he would insist, was far "too macho" for his taste.) *Meet Jackass the Sophisticated Dude; You Want Rowdy and Moronic? Johnny Knoxville Is Poised and Bookish, if You Please,* the *New York Times* trumpeted in 2002, noting how at ease he appeared ordering his meal in French at La Grenouille. The following year, the *Times,* alongside anecdotes about him covering his genitals with bee attractant, noted that Knoxville had been moved to leave his hometown after reading *On the Road,* and that when he first went to LA it had been to write a novel. Every profile seemed to ask a similar question: what is Johnny Knoxville's *deal*?

It would take Knoxville 15 years to get around to even trying to provide an answer; that the question is, in many ways, the same

PARAMOUNT/COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION

one underpinning this particular essay makes his revelations on the subject doubly piquant. "I started to think, 'Why do I love it? Am I addicted to it? Is it coming from a good place?'" he told David Marchese in 2018. "I don't want to overthink things, but I don't want to underthink them either because in this line of work you only get so many chances... Some other actors do their own stunts, but the difference is that their stunts are designed to succeed." He had been filming *Action Point*, a movie about an unregulated theme park for which he had done his own stunts, ending up with four concussions, whiplash, stitches, a destroyed knee and a shattered wrist, and two-and-a-half broken teeth. One day, blowing his nose after discovering it was bloody, he felt his left eye pop, grapelike, out of its socket – "I was blowing air around my eyeball," he explained, "and pushing it out" – forcing the crew to shoot him only from the right side for six days. He had just turned 47, and if he had looked like Jack Nicholson circa 1970 in the earliest days of *Jackass*, he now looked a little more like a car salesman who had been beaten up by a gang of flunkies over money at the racetrack. It had begun to occur to him that death was not an abstract possibility, but something real, the bloody bloom rapidly wearing off the rose as far as self-harm was concerned, now that a colleague – Ryan Dunn, who crashed his 2007 Porsche 911 GT3 in 2011 and died at 34 – had lost his life, and several others had developed debilitating addictions to painkillers, or dependencies on alcohol, or real-deal longings for annihilation that could not be satisfied by taser guns or vomit omelettes. Somewhere between head injuries on the set of *Action Point*, he had begun to think about his dying mother, and about the way his own children might feel if he ended up sacrificing himself on the altar of a 90-minute comedy about an unsafe theme-park with a 19 per cent Metacritic rating. He tells Marchese that he realised something: "I may have a little left in me. But for my sake and my family's sake, I should start winding down."

Thus, Johnny Knoxville ended up adopting another popular American pastime, newer than the nation's lust for violence and a little older than its history of stunt performers:



FREAK POWER
"Some may never live, but the crazy never die," said Knoxville's hero and friend Hunter S. Thompson (above); (left) Johnny starred in the 2018 comedy *Action Point*, with Chris Pontius

COMEDY TURN
In *A Dirty Shame*, the 2004 satirical sex comedy, Knoxville appeared alongside Tracey Ullman

he began to see a therapist. "'I don't want to fix the part of me that does stunts,'" he recalls saying. "'Just to get that out in the open... That's what I don't want to fix.'" In that interview with Marchese, he is coy about what drives a man to throw himself into a children's ball-pit full of snakes, or deliberately crash a motorcycle, or split his head open "like a melon" on the concrete floor of a department store, save for saying that some of his impetus to destroy himself is almost certain to emanate from a dark, "unhealthy place". The reader, left to fill in the blanks, invariably imagines some formative, terrible event that shook these strange desires loose – a childhood injury, an accident bloody enough to scar the mind. David Lynch, the dark suburban yin to Waters' camp suburban yang, has said that as a child he saw a naked woman staggering down the road at night outside his house, "in a dazed state, crying". "I have never forgotten that moment," he told Roger Ebert in an interview in 1986. He has not allowed us to forget it, either – in *Blue Velvet*, Dorothy, a nightclub singer and rape victim, is seen stumbling past the verdant, manicured lawns of her younger lover's neighbourhood stark-naked, evidently in distress. If not all artists make such deliberate connections in their work, re-enacting and restaging these determinative, generative moments as if all art were true crime, it cannot be denied that many of them enjoy gesturing elliptically at their own histories.

What is certain is that when practitioners turn to self-injury, or to the risk of death, the reasons tend to be one or more from a certain laundry list: trauma, Eros, infamy, national identity or history, parental influence, an interest in religious martyrdom, and war. "Art," Leo Tolstoy wrote in *What Is Art?*, "is a human activity consisting in this: that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them." "I feel like the injuries, I share with people," Knoxville told *GQ* in 2021, unconsciously echoing Tolstoy. Although he clarified that what he meant was that his various breaks and scrapes and dick-destroying accidents had happened "in a public way", the implication of a psychic bond between the audience and the stuntman – of the pain, not just the image of its terrible creation, being "shared" – endures. When the pseudonymous critic Uncas Blythe describes the *Jackass* players as "voodoo medics" for post-9/11 American society, he takes pains to underscore the fact that their continued dedication to their practice, bearing pain in perpetuity, is the locus of their power: "The triumph is in density," he says. "There is something uniquely bonding and yet strikingly odd about repeatedly watching *the same people* suffer humiliation, pain, fear and revulsion again and again... Everyone, actor and spectator alike, is bound in an inescapable ritual."

Devoting one's life to agony in order to facilitate the exorcism of the dark and restless spirit of the age seems, *prima facie*, like the kind of thing only a madman or a saint would choose to do. ®

***WHICH AS YOU KNOW MEANS VIOLENCE* IS PUBLISHED BY REPEATER BOOKS ON 13 SEPTEMBER**

FINE LINE/COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION, PICTURELUX / THE HOLLYWOOD ARCHIVE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, CREATIVE COMMONS

WE'RE STILL NOT OKAY (WE PROMISE)

THIS YEAR THE ROCK WORLD HAS BELONGED TO EMO LEGENDS MY CHEMICAL ROMANCE. THEIR POSTPONED WORLD TOUR HAS DELIGHTED THREE GENERATIONS OF FANS ACROSS THE GLOBE. JAMIE MACMILLAN WENT TO THE MILTON KEYNES SHOWS FOR THIS PHOTO SERIES TO CAPTURE WHY THEIR RETURN MEANT MORE THAN JUST NOSTALGIA

BY
EMMA GARLAND

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JAMIE MACMILLAN

Fan-tastic
From far left, Frank Iero, Mikey Way, Gerard Way and Ray Toro proving that they're back and better than ever on their first UK tour in 11 years

Welcome back
Excited fans in Milton Keynes prove that the love is stronger than ever for My Chemical Romance

When My Chemical Romance announced their reformation on Halloween 2019, they didn't know that they would be re-entering the world to find it transformed. In the time that has passed, Covid-19 has completely upended life, and set even the most mundane day-to-day routine against a backdrop of pervading loss. For the band's part, their plans were put on indefinite hold. The hearts and hopes of teens and elder emos alike remained locked in March 2013, seemingly doomed to obsess over the same old interviews and four studio albums for eternity. Now: release.

After a two-year delay, the My Chemical Romance reunion tour is blazing across the world fuelled by a combination of pent-up nostalgia and the fresh traumas of the pandemic. Everywhere you look at the Milton Keynes shows, there is familiarity rebooted. People in ties and too much eyeshadow are descending on unassuming English grounds. TikTok is flooded with viral clips of Gerard Way's stage banter, among them: repeated growling of the word "RRRRATS", pointing and shouting "Look at that *young boy* going to the *parade*!" at a cardboard cut-out of himself held aloft in the crowd, and tales of how he shit his pants after having dairy for breakfast. Fans are obsessing over Setlist.fm like it's a religious text. The merch run features a T-shirt emblazoned with the image of a gay porn star with a My Chemical Romance tramp stamp, which has prompted fervent discussion around the possibility that one of the band members might be LGBTQ+. The prodigal sons of mainstream emo have returned, and everything is in its rightful place.

For a band so preoccupied with death, the circumstances around this tour have ultimately come to define it. Founded in the aftermath of 9/11 before going on to release a best-selling rock opera that carries the listener from a hospital deathbed to an imaginary afterlife, My Chemical Romance's legacy is steeped in shared grief and survival. As a result, each of the shows is loaded with added poignancy. This clearly isn't lost on the band, who seem in their own way changed by the past few years and are now on a trajectory that feels different from the one they were on three years ago.

First and foremost, there's the joy. What's most obvious about this tour is how much fun everyone is having. Gerard Way is all power stances and

On the road
Originally scheduled for the summer of 2020, My Chemical Romance's reunion tour was postponed again and again, before finally kicking off at The Eden Project in Cornwall, followed by sellout performances in Milton Keynes. As well as a mix of hits, fan favourites and deep cuts, the 21-song setlist opened with their new single 'The Foundations of Decay'. The band are currently touring America before heading to New Zealand and Australia next year, winding things up in Sydney in March

Performance
Mikey Way (top left), Gerard Way and Ray Toro (left) and Frank Iero (below left) at Milton Keynes before around 90,000 fans. Said Gerard: "This is the best tour of our whole journey"

Showmen
They're one of the biggest rock groups to emerge in the past 20 years, and MCR haven't lost their edge

put-your-lighters-up, Frank Iero and Ray Toro are running around duelling guitars like classic rock legends, and multi-instrumentalist Mikey Way walks on stage after one show holding one of his kids in each arm while wearing a shirt that says 'Mikey Fucking Way'. They're leaning into their legacy while stripping back some of the more visual theatrics, leaving a performance so exposed that the commanding power of the band can be felt in full force.

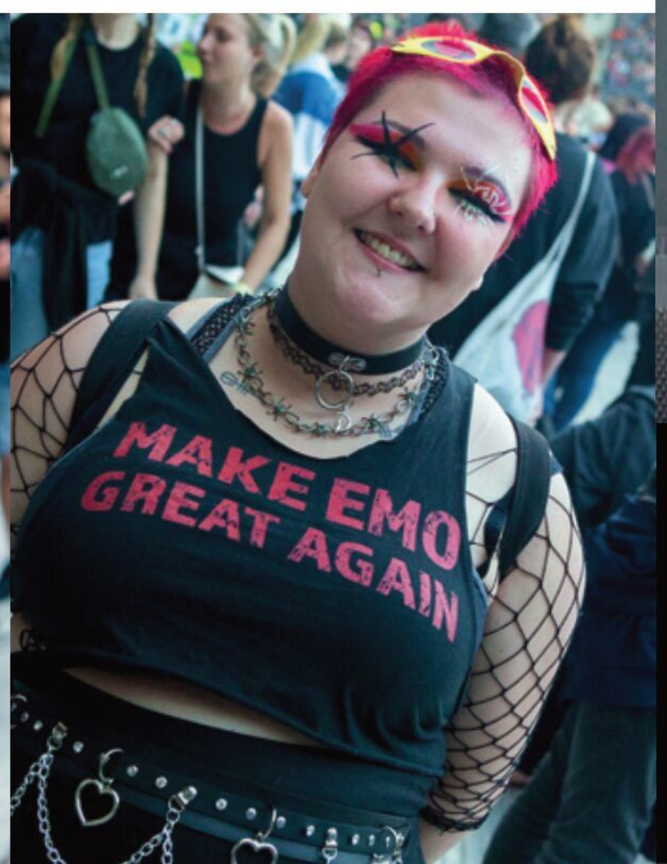
Then, there's the death of it all. 'Foundations of Decay' — their first song in eight years, released on the eve of the tour — contains a direct reference to 9/11 and the subsequent state of the world. The minimal set design also seems to allude to the twin towers, with destroyed buildings flanking the band on either side of the stage. To some it might seem morbid, but not to the MCRmy — and with them firmly in mind at all times, Way paid tribute to those that had passed away over the pandemic.

"The first night [we were] fucking around having a good time and I was talking about how it's been two and a half years and how does it feel and things like that," Way told the crowd at Milton Keynes. "It occurred to me later, after the second show, that there was a bunch of people that were probably gonna be at these shows that aren't here with us any more." An audience member then passed him a homemade flag featuring names of some of the fans who would have been at the show, which he held up in their memory.

The next night they paid tribute to Power Trip frontman Riley Gale, who passed away in August 2020. "I was so inspired by that fucking dude," Way said, before revealing that My Chemical Romance were planning to ask Power Trip to open for them on the tour. "They were a great fucking band. Rest in peace, Riley, motherfucker!" he screamed, before the band launched into 'Famous Last Words' and its resolute chorus of "*I am not afraid to keep on living / I am not afraid to walk this world alone*." There have been many moments like this over the entire tour.

My Chemical Romance has always been more than a band. To fans they're a community, a refuge, a first mate helping them navigate life's more menacing waves. Every aspect of their music exists to confront things like depression, anxiety and alienation and transform them into euphoria, joy and collectivism. They make the simple act of living feel like heroism, and though the past few years have been filled with sadness above all else, the shows are almost certainly hitting harder now than they might have. In 2022, My Chemical Romance return to find themselves not just remembered, but genuinely needed.

"It occurred to me, after the second show, that there was a bunch of people who were probably gonna be at these shows that aren't with us any more"



My Colourful Romance
Emo leads the way for My Chemical Romance fans at Milton Keynes' Stadium MK. Hair in bright hues and creative eyeliner contrast with fans' uniform of black

Why young British women love *The Real Housewives*

Since 2020, *The Real Housewives* franchise has gone from being a US TV phenomenon to an obsession for women in the UK. Why would we fall in love so fast and hard with dramatic, sneaky and narcissistic wives and mothers living in luxury overseas?

By Hannah Ewens

"THE REAL HOUSEWIVES of *Beverly Hills* star Kyle Richards can't escape the show. Not just because people of all stripes – even straight men – now approach her in Los Angeles to express their adoration of it. "There are many times I'll be in a real-life situation and someone will say, 'Oh, I didn't invite this person to my party because of this and that' and I'm thinking, 'This is a typical *Housewives* argument. Oh, God, now there's going to be a big problem,'" Richards tells me over the phone. The *Real Housewives* TV franchise, she believes, has entirely replaced soap operas for women, which they used to watch to relate to the female characters in everyday situations. Of course, the housewives are cleverly handpicked by producers for their watchability. "They choose the people that they do because they have big personalities and obviously you're gonna get a *lot* more drama and entertainment with big personalities," she says.

Hundreds of thousands of British women now love watching a cast of flamboyant American housewives. I used to be a hard-working person. I read books and had opinions on a wide range of subjects. Sometimes I watched independent films on a Sunday night. That was before I found the sprawling *Real Housewives* franchise, a beast of an idea – a reality TV version of *Desperate Housewives* that follows wealthy women in cities including New York, Atlanta, Salt Lake City and more – that, in its many iterations across the US and beyond, has dominated my life for the past two and a half years. I've read some of their ghostwritten memoirs, I think in their vernacular, I know their astrological sun signs. I can quickly digest each season like they're small, perfectly formed satsuma segments. I have watched it in the shower with the laptop open in the sink, during lunch breaks and, if I didn't have plans, from finishing work to the moment I closed my eyes for sleep. When I temporarily cancelled my subscription to streaming service Hayu to get a work project finished, it felt like a rejection of my core ego, my purpose and my family. Within a couple of months, I was back – my hands were tied, another season of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* had begun.

There's been self-examination, sure. At some point when a TV show is running your life you wonder: 'Am I doing this to myself because I'm depressed? Full of malaise at the state of the world? Self-sabotaging my goals and dreams?' No – I am quite happy. I'm choosing to enrich my soul in this way because these women are mothers, my sisters and my awful best friends, and the show is one of the best things I've watched on the small (or big) screen for a decade. My life is better with these women firmly in it.

Since its conception in 2006, American cable network Bravo has expanded its show into different cities: currently there are a paltry 11 instalments, 41 series and spin-offs and 159 seasons. Other countries across

ISTOCK, BRAVO MEDIA LLC

the world have tried their own versions to varying degrees of success (there's something about the ridiculousness of *New York*, *Beverly Hills* and *Atlanta* that you just can't capture elsewhere, and the production teams outside the US aren't as incisive or funny with the editing). Despite its popularity with American audiences, it was only really in 2020 that young British women jumped on the *Housewives* train, as confirmed to me by Hayu, the streaming platform where all up-to-date instalments of the show live in their entirety. During the first pandemic lockdown in the UK, Netflix showed a couple of the early seasons of *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. We had days and nights to do nothing but watch TV. From there, young women were hooked and illegally streamed *Beverly Hills* and other instalments or signed up to Hayu. When I spoke to Hayu's team, they told me that nearly 9 out of 10 Hayu subscribers are female and the majority are between 18-34 years of age. For those too scared to jump into shows ten seasons deep already, *Salt Lake City* was launched from scratch.

Suddenly, the UK was sold on *Housewives* in the same way that America attached itself to our *Love Island*. According to up-to-date YouGov data, 77 per cent of Brits have now heard of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* – that's more than British classics of the reality genre *Don't Tell The Bride* or *Celebs Go Dating* or global entertainment successes like *Orange Is the New Black*, *Peep Show* or *Stranger Things*. If you're a pop culture fan, you can't escape it and I don't know a single woman who has watched it and not allowed it to completely infiltrate their life.

Someone asked me why women love it so much when it showcases the worst of female behaviour and makes housewives' arguably vapid and narcissistic lifestyles aspirational. Obviously, that's partly why – but it's too easy an answer! Googling to see if anyone had already written about this, I found a blog from 2011, written by an American woman, which opens with the line, "I'm not embarrassed to admit that I've been watching *The Real Housewives of New York* because so many intelligent, educated women I know do, too." Over the years, some feminists have come to celebrate the show, including Camille Paglia, who said in an interview that *Housewives* is "intelligent and sophisticated documentary filmmaking that really needs to be honoured".

In the world of *Housewives*, the most dramatic and eccentric middle-aged and older women you know take centre stage and relate to each other as if their lives depend on it. The number of cameras shooting every scene allows for the intricate nature of female conflict to be displayed in all its rich detail – the covering up of offence, flashes of disgust or pain, fake behaviour writ large. Something is always at risk – their reputation, their money, their standing within the group.

As housewife on the short-lived *Real Housewives of Toronto* and reality TV producer Kara Alloway tells me, "You can't put women in a room together and not have conflict, it will 100 per cent happen. If it's organic, the viewer is intelligent enough to realise that and the viewer will have a better time with the show. You have to be a woman to recognise all that." Her husband will often pass by when she is watching a scene and ask if it isn't boring to watch. Alloway says, "He doesn't recognise the nuances. 'No, no, no, no, don't you see what's happening here?'"

> "You can't put women in a room together and not have conflict"
>
> —*Alloway*

Importantly, *Housewives* isn't just pure reality programming. TV critic Lauren O'Neill argued in the UK's *i* paper, collating the views of various experts on the franchise that it has a crossover with factual true crime, so simultaneously stokes our obsession with that genre. In some of the shows, wives or their husbands have been found to be involved in fraud, tax evasion or something more untoward that ends in investigation and even jail time. Elsewhere, rumours fly and darkness bubbles up and we as viewers play detective following the clues that producers, editors and women's faces leave behind.

All wives play their part in the high drama, but the range of roles means there's someone every viewer can align with. There is the loving, warm, family woman (*Beverly Hills*'s Kyle Richards or *New Jersey*'s Melissa Gorga), who managed to bag the hottest husband; the total loose cannons whose behaviour simply cannot be predicted (*Salt Lake City*'s Jen Shah or Mary Cosby); and then there are the 'villains', women like *Beverly Hills*'s infamous Lisa Vanderpump.

Having been on both sides of the reality TV camera, Alloway recognises that she was framed as a classic *Housewives* villain. During casting, Alloway and others did a psychological assessment paid for by the production. She asked the company if she could see her results and they obliged. "The first thing I saw it said was that 'Kara has a very high emotional intelligence,'" she says, "And I went 'Bingo – I'm the villain.' I had the extreme pleasure of sitting in on a one-on-one casting for reality television with one of the Godfathers of reality TV, Jonathan Murray (*The Real World, The Simple Life, Keeping Up with the Kardashians*). And he said, 'The number one thing you look for in a villain is you want someone who has a high emotional intelligence.'" She wasn't surprised then when she saw the edit framing her as a nightmare.

In the reviews of the one-off *Toronto* debut series, critics and fans agree that Alloway was the star who carried the show on her back, without whom it wouldn't have worked. "For all intents and purposes, the villain is what we tune in to see right there, they're relatable," Alloway says, "but they're baffling at the same time. Usually, they're a bit aspirational. They come from a strong

TOMMY GARIC/BRAVO, CHAD KIRKLAND/BRAVO, BRAVO MEDIA LLC

VIVA LA DIVAS (Clockwise from right) Meet the housewives of *New Jersey;* the housewives of *Salt Lake City* with host and executive producer Andy Cohen; the cast of *Beverly Hills*

point of view. They have a fearlessness *and* a vulnerability." At some point or another, we all think like a *Housewives* villain even if we don't voice or act on those impulses.

The housewives that last are the ones who are genuinely who they are, even if that means showcasing flamboyance or unsavoury personality flaws (especially then). "What I bring to the table is just being 100 per cent authentic always and that means embarrassing yourself sometimes and not always being *at* your best, *looking* your best, *behaving* your best but that's what life is," explains Richards. "I see some people come in [to the show] sometimes and they're trying to create this person that they want people to like or create this person that's like this businesswoman when I don't really feel that they are. Just be yourself and you'll succeed here."

It's refreshing to see a reality show centred predominantly around friendship (or enemy-ship) rather than, as its tongue-in-cheek title might suggest, marriage, kids and work. This is the real bread and butter of being a woman, where we uniquely thrive. In the show, the men are demoted to merely eye candy or financers and enablers for the women's drama. All the husbands talk about is their wives, and all the wives talk about is each other.

The only exception to this is *New Jersey*, which, reflective of its Italian-American population, is completely centred around family. There, the men get involved in the petty drama and fights and are diva stars of the show, too. "We look for cities with strong personalities," executive producer Andy Cohen said in 2014 when discussing the strategy for picking the next show. Through this, as a British viewer, you understand the uniqueness of living in North America, where every state is like a completely different country. For example, in *New York* many of the housewives have historically been single, *Atlanta* shows a powerful community of Black women, and *Salt Lake City* grapples with material wealth, sexuality and power versus the dominance of the Mormon religion in the area.

Predominantly, though, what has captured the hearts and spirits of young women is the fact that women like this are few and far between in pop culture and public life. When I think of the middle-aged and older women we have here in the UK, I can probably list the ones that feel cool and inspiring to me because of the ageist and sexist nature of these industries that keep those over 35 out. Most of them are celebrated within hun and camp culture already – the women in *EastEnders*, Vivienne Westwood, Kate Moss, Miriam Margolyes, Joanna Lumley, Jennifer Saunders, Dawn French and Naomi Campbell. People who appreciate those women make up the female and queer fanbase for *Housewives*, too.

Twenty-nine-year-old Daisy from London started watching *Housewives* around the same time I did and concluded that it was the vitality the wives show that was radical to see and kept her watching episode after episode. "It's really refreshing to see housewives in their 40s and 50s having fun and clubbing and getting wasted and living their best lives and looking amazing," she said. "In the past, it's been that your life is basically over as soon as you're approaching menopause. The housewives make me not scared but excited about getting older, which isn't something I'd experienced before watching it."

Of course, there's the fashion, the luxury and the excessive lifestyle to admire about the show. But *Housewives* is not aspirational because you want to be rich enough to never age in the forehead, or successful enough to have your own range of candles and a tell-all memoir, or lucky enough to have a husband who is either a) unnaturally hot or b) old and monied and increasingly sick. It's aspirational because every minute spent watching it is time spent with women in their real prime years who are just as funny, smart, drunk, devious and emotionally wrought as your own friends. To love *Housewives* is to realise that whatever life throws at you in the coming decades – husbands (yawn) or kids (sure) or divorce (chic) – that being horrid little cows with your gossipy liquid lunches, girly holidays and free-for-all drunk-at-home parties never has to end.

HAYU IS THE HOME OF *THE REAL HOUSEWIVES*. STREAM NOW WITH NEW EPISODES DROPPING THE SAME DAY AS THE US

HEIDI GUTMAN/BRAVO, BRAVO MEDIA LLC

Introducing the most iconic housewives as chosen by Rolling Stone UK

It's not the cities or fashion or decadent parties that people remember from the Bravo hit franchise – it's the housewives themselves. These larger-than-life women have kept us glued to our screens by orchestrating drama, tossing down drinks and breaking the hearts of their fellow wives

By Hannah Ewens and Joseph Kocharian

Karen Huger

Potomac

The self-proclaimed Grande Dame of *Potomac*, Karen Huger works hard to keep her crown, especially with her frenemies Gizelle Bryant and Ashley Darby constantly scurrying around, plotting her downfall at every turn. Most housewives are (dubiously) rich, some are glamorous, and very few are funny, but Karen gives you all three. She's had her fair share of troubles, including moving out of the affluent Potomac area to (gasp) a rental property, alleged affairs and husband Ray's tax problems. After dodging and weaving allegations for multiple seasons, she decided to address the rumours in a way that only Karen could, by holding a press conference with the ladies... without any press. No one does petty quite like Karen: she will fight even the smallest of battles, including usurping castmate Wendy Osefa's paltry one-wick candle launch, with her own three-wick La'Dame candle. The feud is still going, and at last count saw [checks notes] both women offering five- *and* seven-wick candles. The wicked step-mother hen of the group, Karen often brings the freshman housewives under her wing during their first season, before devouring them if they try to fly off on their own (or too close to her rival Gizelle) and claim the crown. That can't happen, and she won't let it, clipping their wings if they get above their station, after all, the Grande Dame stays the Grande Dame...

Karen Huger

Countess Luann De Lesseps

New York

The Countess has had so many iconic moments, only a memoir and spin-off movie could do her justice. Her tenure is filled with scandal, including an alleged dalliance with a Jack Sparrow lookalike pirate in St Barts and her ill-fated marriage to the Upper East Side's top shagger, Tom D'Agostino. Luann has always kept us entertained, including her cult, perennially sold-out cabaret show where she performs her much loved ear-worms 'Chic C'est La Vie', 'Money Can't Buy You Class' and 'Feelin' Jovani'. The trajectory of her demise over the past 12 seasons of *New York* is akin to a Shakespearean tragedy, going from teaching etiquette lessons, attending galas and demanding people call her the Countess in the first season, to falling into a bush in Mexico and ending up being arrested in Palm Beach for 'not' stalking her ex-husband and assaulting a police officer. Despite her many missteps, including being sued by her own children, Luann has, staggeringly, still managed not to gain any trace of humility or learning from her journey. The one season she was relegated to a 'friend' of — sometimes Housewives are demoted or leave as regulars and merely pop in for coffees and parties — the Countess showed Bravo what they were missing and created such chaos on the trip that she was immediately reinstated as a main cast member for the next season, proving that NYC can't be cool without the Countess. Her delicious lack of self-awareness, delusion and narcissism, coupled with her lack of talent, makes her the neurotic apple of our eye. Her flaws are what make

Luann de Lesseps

her so captivating to watch — after all, as she said, "Even Louis Vuitton makes mistakes."

Teresa Giudice

New Jersey

With one action, Ms Giudice raised the bar for physical drama in *Housewives*. Before she flipped a table in 2009, the behaviour of the women across the franchise was comparatively contained, limited to venomous insults and damaging attacks on personal characters. Now the ladies from *Orange County* to *New York* knew what was expected and celebrated: pure manic energy and a willingness to evoke God when getting violent at the local Italian restaurant. Whenever Teresa's eyes go blank, you know the *Kill Bill* siren is playing in her head and you're in for a treat. She's mellowed in recent years after she and her husband both served jail time for fraud and you can't help but love her through her personal weaknesses, and tribulations with her brother and his wife. As other iconic women have come and gone, Teresa has remained the queen bee with her multiple lookalike diva daughters. When you think about the franchise as a whole, *New Jersey* isn't one of the most striking iterations of the show, but Teresa Giudice is at the forefront of the *Real Housewives* cinematic universe. Forget *The Sopranos*, she delivered the spirit — or at least a demon — of New Jersey to the whole world. There was a cultural shift when she spat those immortal words: "Don't forget, girlfriend, I'm from Paterson, did you forget?"

Nene Leakes

Atlanta

When *RHONY*'s Bethenny Frankel was asked who belonged on the Mount Rushmore of *Real Housewives*, she created a highly charged debate online with Bravo stans. Throughout all the endless combinations that fans and stan accounts argued, one face was set in stone, that of one Ms Linnethia 'Nene' Leakes. Even if you haven't watched a single second of any *Housewives* franchise, there is a high chance that you've heard of the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* alum. Due to the sheer power of her put-downs, Nene has transcended into viral meme culture. Her time on the show is sprinkled with wonderful one-liners such as "I said what I said," "Now why am I in it?" and "So nasty and so rude." When Nene was still on the show, she was clearly the star, something that the ratings always reflected, with *Real Housewives of Atlanta* constantly topping the TV ratings. Whether she's embarking on her TV and theatre projects in LA and NYC, rolling her eyes at Kim Zolciak's music career, chastising castmate Kenya Michaels for living in the ghetto because she had a "white refrigerator" or telling her friend-come-nemesis to close her legs to married men, Nene's entertainment value is off the charts, and even though she has exited the show, she stays on top, and stays "riiiiich".

Lisa Vanderpump

Beverly Hills

LVP, a sneaky and devious little Brit abroad, is such notoriously great television that Bravo has continued her long-standing spin-off *Vanderpump Rules* for a decade and counting. From the moment she arrived on our screens, bringing her tiny dog breakfast in a (pink) bed on a silver platter, Vanderpump's wealth, pomp and wry sense of humour demanded respect and obsession. To collect her best moments for a YouTube fancam would be impossible: there was the time she flew a miniature horse on a private jet; the time she walked Hanky, her pet swan, in West Hollywood; when she and Brandi Glanville had a physical scrap. Oh, or the time she nicknamed Adrienne Maloof's shoe design "The Maloof Hoof". When she eventually left the show in season nine, it was because all her scheming and manipulation caught up with her. Still, in true Vanderpump style, she denied it all bitterly and flamboyantly and told them all to kiss her British arse.

Jen Shah

Salt Lake City

There was never a quiet moment with tiny, fuming Jen Shah around: quite literally, there was screaming, crying and more screaming whenever she entered the frame. She threatened to drown a passive audience of one (Whitney Rose) in a hot tub, inadvertently revealed her privates to her friend's teenage son and pointed more fingers than John Travolta, Donna Summer and every dance floor in the entire 70s combined. Whether you forgave her for being mean and downright toxic towards Meredith Marks's teenage son, you had to admit she dominated the action and subsequent conversations for the first two seasons of *Salt Lake City*. In what is now easily one of the top three *Housewives* episodes of all time, she fled the scene mid-shoot when she was alerted that the FBI were coming for her, starting a cat-and-mouse chase that the Bravo production team managed to capture in tantalising, dark and hilarious detail while the other women gossip about what is going on. Recently, she pleaded guilty for conspiracy to fraud dramatically close to the start date for her trial for allegations that she tele-scammed hundreds of mostly older people out of money. Even if the shady lady isn't around to start fights at parties for season three, you can guarantee the levity of this serious case will keep everyone shouting for her — and about her.

TOMMY GARIC/BRAVO, CHAD KIRKLAND/BRAVO, BRAVO MEDIA LLC

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Reviews

Music

POP REVISITED

With echoes of 2010 chart hits and a bit of kitsch for good luck, Rina Sawayama is on fine form

Rina Sawayama

Hold the Girl

Dirty Hit

★★★½☆

WHEN RINA Sawayama embarked on a long-overdue victory lap for her eponymous debut album, her Dynasty tour quickly became one of last year's most talked-about live performances. Knitting together a carefully curated blend of the Japanese-British artist's cultural influences – from city pop and Final Fantasy to the crucial Big Pop Girls of the late 90s and early 00s – Sawayama herself felt touchable somehow, even amid the glossy production. "I love you for who you are," she told her audience ahead of a pared-back, acoustic rendition of 'Chosen Family'. ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Neff Alfaro

MARCUS COOPER

It's a song that could easily teeter into cheesy earnestness in the wrong hands, but Sawayama has the charisma to pull off a hulking great slab of sentimentality like this. It's a quality that puts her in excellent company with Lady Gaga – the artist to whom she's most frequently compared – and on Sawayama's second album *Hold the Girl*, it's a connection that gathers even more credence.

While her debut was spiked and futuristic, its successor often goes straight for the pop jugular. With Stuart Price (Madonna, Dua Lipa) and Paul Epworth (Adele, Rihanna) on the credits sheet alongside long-time collaborators like Clarence Clarity, there's a more straightforward, immediate sound to *Hold the Girl*. Initially, it shares a lightness with circa-2010 pop records like Gaga's 'Born This Way' and Katy Perry's 'Teenage Dream' in a first half that's loaded with massive singles. Racing to cram in the meme-worthy references, 'This Hell' collages together pop-culture nods at lightning speed, gleefully embracing eternal damnation as Sawayama quotes Paris Hilton ("*that's hot!*") and issues snappy sound bites ("*Get in line, pass the wine, bitch, we're going straight to Hell*"). Like a more raucous sibling to 'Chosen Family' with a heightened grasp of camp, 'This Hell' takes a clear aim at American Christian conservatism and invokes the visual stylings of the virulently homophobic Westboro Baptist Church in the process, while toying with country music tropes that bring to mind both Shania Twain and Madonna's stetson-slinging 'Music'. Recalling both The Corrs and Christian pop star Stacie Orrico, the soaring 'Catch Me in the Air' is both subtler and more personal; an ode to single parents and Sawayama's relationship with her mother.

Towards its second half, *Hold the Girl* becomes more fragmented. A kitschy slab of Eurotrash, 'Frankenstein' is divisive stuff, while 'Imagining' harnesses the avant-garde strains of pop that felt more dominant on Sawayama's debut. Next to the Kelly Clarkson-nodding pop-rock steamers 'Hurricanes' and 'Phantom', 'Send My Love to John' feels cloying. Written from the perspective of a regretful parent who has rejected their queer child, it's an LGBTQ+ country ballad that spends too much time focusing on the motivations of homophobes. Far stronger is the soaring closer 'To Be Alive', which is underpinned by a pounding beat and a hefty, transcendent chorus. Drawing on similar threads of UK garage, the title track is a joyful, gentle declaration of self-acceptance that's surely up there with Sawayama's best work to date.

In spite of all this, when compared to her debut there is less newness to be found on *Hold the Girl*, sometimes to its detriment. While *SAWAYAMA* was weird, warped pop that felt dynamic and unlike anything else, here Sawayama's usually distinctive voice is at times lost in the sheer number of musical touchstones on offer. Although its blend of sincerity and camp will no doubt earn multiple comparisons to Gaga's 'Born This Way', it doesn't always forge its own singular voice in the same way. **EL HUNT**

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

The ills of the world and perky pop sit side by side in Muse's latest album

Muse

Will of the People

Warner Records

★★★½☆

SUBTLETY HAS NEVER been Muse's forte, but even for them, ninth studio album *Will of the People* is remarkably on the nose. According to a statement, the band's new record was informed by no less than "a pandemic, new wars in Europe, massive protests & riots, an attempted insurrection, Western democracy wavering, rising authoritarianism, wildfires and natural disasters and the destabilization of the global order". Cheery stuff.

Across the album's 10 songs, it's not entirely clear whether you're supposed to feel soothed by the catharsis of the band confronting these global crises or galvanised into action through sheer terror. For the most part, it's hard not to just focus on frontman Matt Bellamy as he bellows lyrics such as "*Let's push the emperors into the ocean*" and "*We'll smash your institutions to pieces.*"

On the album opener and title track – a song significantly more fun than the mission statement would have you believe – the band settle into a funky strut, while recent single 'Compliance' sees Bellamy posturing as a figure of power who "*seduce us during times of vulnerability*" over a perky pop song.

Elsewhere, 'Liberation' sees the frontman perhaps go more Freddie Mercury than ever before, bolstered by booming backing vocals and piano. The absurdity of it all takes away from a legitimate aim to highlight the ills of the world: *Will of the People* is more of an escapist fantasy than Muse likely intended it to be. After all, Bellamy has said that he's on a personal mission to move away from the conspiracy-esque, wake-up-sheeple vibes that subtly ran through some of the band's earlier albums.

"I've clawed my way out of my own ignorance and tried to understand as best I can what's going on," he said in a recent interview with *The Guardian*. "I started to get away from, let's say, quackery."

It means that the record's overarching themes are tongue-in-cheek, leaving it free to be enjoyed as a carnival of silliness. It's a vibe that reaches its apex on 'We Are Fucking Fucked', the album's closing song. That a band in 2022 have been given the tools to be as ridiculous as possible and to carry this through without restraint – they are notably portrayed as disembodied heads carved into stone on the album's cover! – should be applauded. This time, at least, you sense they're very much in on the joke. **WILL RICHARDS**

JEFF FORNEY

Quick Hits

Six new albums you need to know about now

Jockstrap

I Love You Jennifer B

Rough Trade

HOLD TIGHT Georgia Ellery and Taylor Skye make thrillingly unpredictable music, and debut album *I Love You Jennifer B* stretches their limits even further. With Ellery on strings and vocals and Skye working magic with computers and tape machines, they create joyous pop songs ('Glasgow'), mangled techno concoctions ('50/50') and soul classics ('Greatest Hits').

★★★★☆

Robbie Williams

XXV

Columbia

ROBBIE REMIXED Robbie Williams' biggest hits are strong enough to survive any form of mutilation through covers, remixes and beyond. Luckily, the orchestral reworkings of 'Angels', 'Let Me Entertain You' and beyond from Netherlands-based Metropole Orkest on new album *XXV* suit them perfectly, adding grandeur and a new sheen to songs that will never fade.

★★★★☆

Yeah Yeah Yeahs

Cool It Down

Secretly Canadian

EVERYBODY SAY YEAH Nine years after their last album, New York's glitter-drenched heroes return with their fifth record. On *Cool It Down*, the fire in their bellies is less fierce, with their trademark pure energy replaced by widescreen grandeur: opener 'Spitting Off the Edge of the World' and 'Wolf' could easily sit on the next *James Bond* or *Stranger Things* soundtrack.

★★★½☆

Craig David

22

BMG

FLAVA OF THE MONTH Since re-emerging in the late 2010s, Craig David has clung onto his fame impeccably. New album *22* dishes up throwback UK garage beats, collaborations with MNEK and Wretch 32 and a constant affable charm from David that will secure his place in the zeitgeist a little while longer.

★★★½☆

Marcus Mumford

(self-titled)

Island

ALL BY HIMSELF On the Mumford & Sons leader's surprise solo debut, he recruits Phoebe Bridgers, Clairo and more for a record that widens his scope significantly. Across its 10 songs, he attempts big-hearted rock ('Better Off High'), intimate, Bon Iver-influenced vignettes ('Prior Warning') and simple folk ('How') with largely positive results.

★★★½☆

Two Door Cinema Club

Keep On Smiling

Lower Third

EASY LISTENING After taking an experimental, kitschy turn on 2019's *False Alarm*, indie's great survivors return with fifth album *Keep On Smiling*, which sees little deviation from the norm. 'Everybody's Cool' and 'Lucky' are amiable indie-pop jams, and while there's little to surprise here, there are plenty of melodies to keep the party rollin' on.

★★★☆☆

CONTRIBUTOR: WILL RICHARDS

JOCKSTRAP: EDDIE WHELAN, YEAH YEAH YEAHS: DAVID BLACK, CRAIG DAVID: EDWARD COOKE

NEW BLOOD

WHEN YUNGBLUD DEBUTED 'The Funeral' earlier this year, the Doncaster artist offered a glimpse of an eclectic new sound on his third album. The signature pop-punk spirit was present and correct on that lead track, but its Billy Idol-esque stomp hinted that a flirtation with 80s pop could be on the cards. This has fully materialised on an impressive record that gives a knowing nod to the decade's leading lights. Among these are The Cure's Robert Smith, a known idol of Yungblud's, who is credited for the use of the beat from 'Close to Me' on second track 'Tissues'.

Elsewhere, 'Sex Not Violence' sees the singer trading in explosive synth-pop, with a chorus that's tailor-made for the huge venues this burgeoning cult-hero is now playing.

Yungblud

Yungblud

★★★★☆

But for all the success of this latest retro trajectory, it is the album's more subdued moments that stand out. On 'I Cry', he offers a powerful response to critics who question his punk spirit and sexual orientation. "*Everybody online keeps saying I'm not really gay / Start dating men when they go to therapy*," he sings against glitchy beats and AutoTune. "*And I spend most of my days thinking, 'What the fuck do they want from me?'*"

Similarly, the punk-inspired closer 'Boy in the Black Dress' sees the singer holding up a typically unrepentant two fingers to gender norms. It's a track that perfectly reflects the album's ethos – Yungblud is still a champion for the disenfranchised, but with a fresh, experimental direction, a new era is calling. **NICK REILLY**

The *Bad Sisters* cast: (left to right) Becka (Eve Hewson), Eva (Sharon Horgan), Grace (Anne-Marie Duff), Ursula (Eva Birthistle) and Bibi (Sarah Greene)

TV.

THICKER THAN WATER

When four of the Garvey sisters discover that their other sister is being mistreated by her husband, they don't hesitate to take matters into their own hands...

Bad Sisters

STARRING	Sharon Horgan, Anne-Marie Duff, Eva Birthistle
NETWORK	Apple TV+
AIR DATE	Now showing

★★★★★

A WOMAN mourning a man in an open casket, only to realise that he is seemingly lying dead while also having a massive erection, is not what you expect as the opening joke for a show on play-it-safe Apple TV+. But then again, why should we be surprised that the streaming giant is ready to push the boundaries? Earlier in the year, Disney+ became the home of *Pam & Tommy*, a Hulu biographical drama about Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee that infamously featured a scene where Lee has a conversation with his (prosthetic) penis.

Fittingly, the first episode of this dark comedy drama, starring and executive-produced by Sharon Horgan (the mind behind the excellent *Catastrophe* and *Pulling*), is called 'The Prick'.

Following sisters Eva (Horgan), Grace (Anne-Marie Duff), Becka (Eve Hewson), Bibi (Sarah Greene) and Ursula (Eva Birthistle), *Bad Sisters* opens with the death of Grace's partner John Paul (Claes Bang). Yet hardly anyone, bar Grace, is grieving his loss. A flashback shows us why. He is shown to be repulsive, pouring water on someone's announcement of good news, does not flush the toilet at a family gathering (eww) and openly jokes about Eva's inability to get pregnant and relishes her upset reaction.

When the sisters fear that Grace is being subjected to more sinister treatment by John Paul in private – and we see Grace being controlled, manipulated and gaslit by him – the sisters

contemplate whether to go to the extreme length of bumping him off to save their sibling.

At the heart of the show is this question: to what ends do you go to protect and save a loved one? "You're talking about taking a man's life!" responds Eva, as Bibi puts forward a plot.

"Not a man," responds Bibi. "That man."

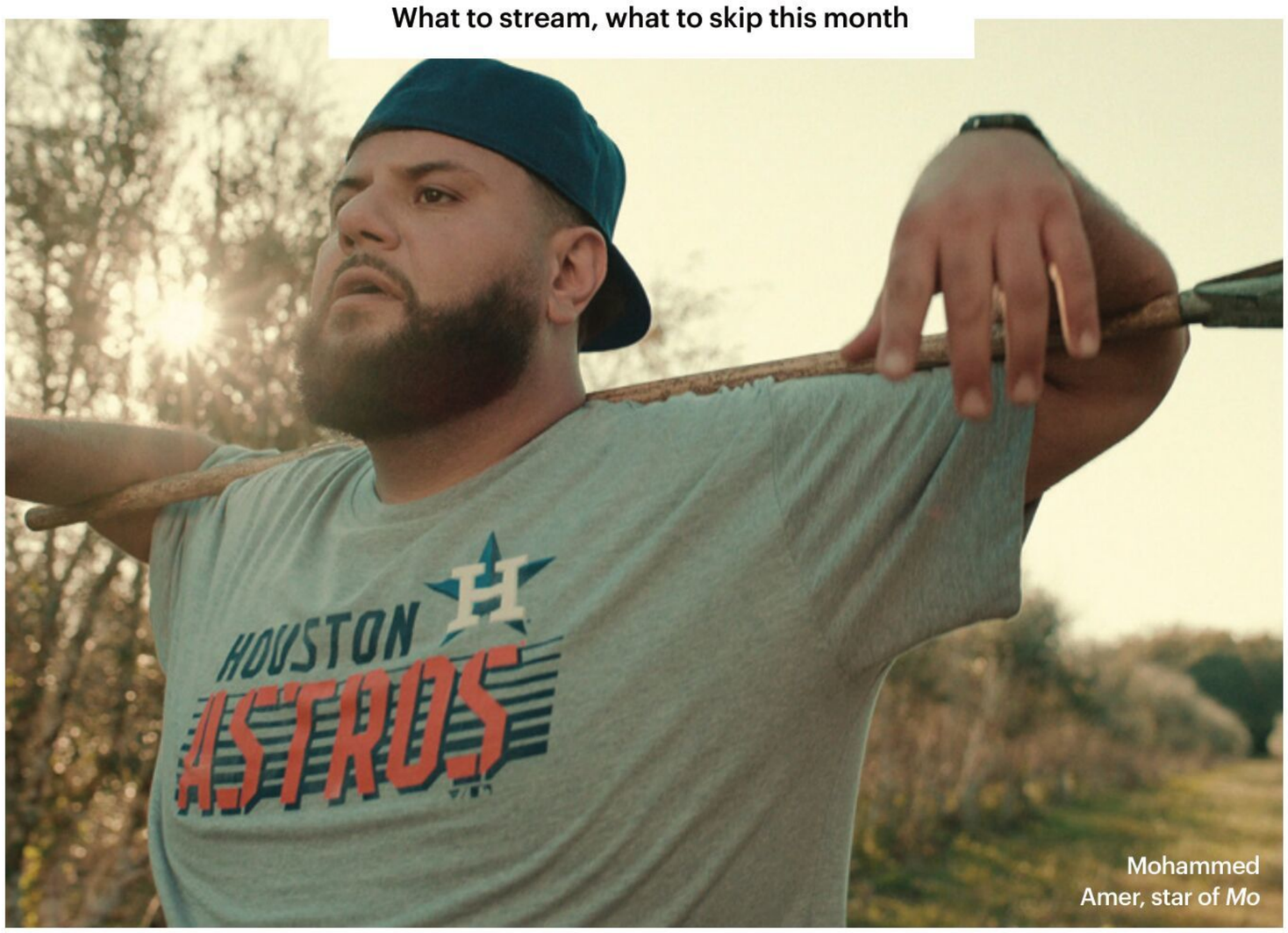
Although the number of characters can at times feel a little overwhelming, the joy and strength of *Bad Sisters* is how it explores the love and hate – and the undeniable solidarity – within many families. The nuances it spotlights, such as sisters being able to instantly see through each other's lies or to detect if their behaviour is ever so slightly out of character, is relatable for anyone who grew up in a hectic household (I have three older sisters). And despite this being an adaptation of the Flemish television show *Clan*, the humour and style throughout is trademark Horgan.

A particular highlight is the relationship between life insurers Thomas (Brian Gleeson) and his half-brother Daryl (Matthew Claffin) as they try to work out if the sisters are responsible for John Paul's death and realise that a pay-out would cripple their family business. The fact that their investigation is pretty much based off watching TV police detective shows adds to the randomness of it all.

In keeping with other Apple TV+ originals, each new episode of *Bad Sisters* drops weekly, which is a perfect strategy. With this series being such a treat, the anticipation only adds to the enjoyment. **SCOTT BRYAN**

WATCH LIST

What to stream, what to skip this month



Mohammed Amer, star of *Mo*

SOMEWHERE TO CALL HOME

Mo

NETWORK	Netflix
AIR DATE	Now showing

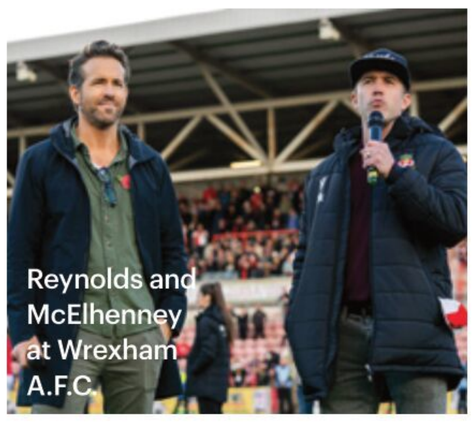
★★★★☆

We are in the age of autobiographical or semi-autobiographical programming, where the star also writes, acts and executive-produces. It often makes for compelling TV, not only because of the sheer talent required to actually make this happen, but also because the plot usually taps into a truth based on personal, lived experience.

The comedian Mo — aka Mohammed Amer — who you might recognise from a set of successful Netflix comedy specials, has based this series on what he's been through as a refugee from Iraq trying to obtain US citizenship. Co-created with Ramy Youssef (behind the semi-autobiographical series *Ramy*, based on his own life), *Mo* articulately explores how being in the US immigration system can leave people stuck in both financial and emotional paralysis. For instance, in the opening episode we witness how Mo is unable to pay for hospital treatment after a supermarket shooting.

"I have never been to Palestine," says Mo after a friend comments on his pending asylum. "I don't have citizenship there; I don't have it here. I'm like a refugee free agent."

Mo is rich in authenticity and heart. The only issue is that the plot can often move at breakneck speed, when sometimes all it needs is a pause to allow each situation to sink in. This minor gripe aside, *Mo* makes for absorbing, thought-provoking viewing. **SCOTT BRYAN**



Reynolds and McElhenney at Wrexham A.F.C.

OWN GOAL

Welcome to Wrexham

NETWORK	Disney+
AIR DATE	Now showing

★★☆☆☆

Remember when a bunch of Hollywood names got involved in a British football club, hoping desperately to make things better and to not make a mess of it? No, this isn't the hit Apple TV+ series *Ted Lasso* starring Jason Sudeikis. It's the other one.

In 2020, actors Ryan Reynolds (*Deadpool*) and Rob McElhenney (*It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*) teamed up to buy Welsh football club Wrexham A.F.C., the third oldest professional football team in the world.

Their purchase rightfully raised eyebrows and generated plenty of headlines, but it wasn't done as a joke or publicity stunt — even if Reynolds and McElhenney did not meet each other in person until after the deal was done (yes, really). As this new Disney+ documentary following the pair reveals, their stewardship comes from a genuine enthusiasm for the sport. They also wanted to improve the local community, knowing how much of a positive difference a thriving club can make.

Although Reynolds' and McElhenney's hearts are in the right place, this series is perhaps too tailored towards American audiences who may not know much about British football, an aspect that may alienate homegrown viewers. In fact, there's so much exposition that at one point the documentary helpfully explains that Wales is, in fact, a separate country from England.... **SCOTT BRYAN**

Banderas as Félix Rivero, Cruz as Lola Cuevas and Martínez as Iván Torres star in this showbiz satire

Film

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION!

The making of a film within a film gives a laugh-out-loud insight into the mad world of movies

Official Competition

STARRING Penelope Cruz, Antonio Banderas

DIRECTED BY Mariano Cohn and Gastón Duprat

★★★★☆

PENÉLOPE Cruz is a hoot in this smart, bitterly funny satire lampooning the film industry – in spiky Spanish style. Cruz plays Lola Cuevas, an eccentric, posturing film director who's hired by a rich man who wants to produce a film of a best-selling book that he has never read. Cuevas is known as one of the best directors in the business, so a considerable amount of cash is thrown her way to workshop with her chosen two actors: egocentric film star Félix Rivero (Banderas) and sceptical Argentinian thespian Iván Torres (Oscar Martínez). Pitting the two against each other in her gleaming modernist home, she watches them unravel with a sadistic glint in her eye, while Rivero's A-list demands threaten to derail the entire project.

It's a hilarious insight into the weird and wacky world of movie-making, highlighting the whimsical and often pointless lengths gone to by producers, stars, directors and their long-suffering assistants. With a huge curly red mane and an over-the-top wardrobe, Lola is a wonderfully curious character, exuding a confidence that may not be justified. It's testament to Cruz's versatility that she is every bit as good as she is in more dramatic fare, such as Pedro Almodóvar's *Parallel Mothers*, which earned her an Oscar nomination. Given that *Official Competition* features two Almodóvar regulars, the film invites comparisons with the great Spanish helmer, and they're not unwarranted: this has a zany humour and a delightful sense of the absurd.

Official Competition may be too comedic to earn Cruz another Oscar nod, but the film has played well at festivals such as Venice. This is meta filmmaking in the extreme – art imitating life. It's also a very slick production, avoiding many of the pitfalls it mocks, thanks to a tight script and excellent performances. Banderas is very funny as the conceited movie star whose insecurities are exposed in the company of the erudite (or presumed erudite). And there's an uncomfortable but brilliant scene in which Cuevas instructs both men to kiss the female lead.

Events take a dramatic turn at the end, cementing this film's darkly comic nature. But along the way it's a sunny, stylish look at the madness of movies with characters who are self-serving but endlessly watchable. And if it seems over the top, bear in mind that Argentinian writer-directors Cohn and Duprat have been in the business a while, and this may be frighteningly close to real life experience. There really is no business like showbusiness. *26 AUGUST*

ANNA SMITH

OFFICIAL COMPETITION: (ABOVE) @MANOLOPAVON, (LEFT) @SAMANTHALOPEZ

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor

Caprice (Léa Seydoux) gets to work on Saul (Viggo Mortensen)

DYSTOPIAN FANTASY

Crimes of the Future
STARRING Viggo Mortensen, Léa Seydoux
DIRECTED BY David Cronenberg
★★★☆☆

DAVID CRONENBERG'S LATEST BODY HORROR is a dark, and not terribly convincing, vision of a future in which people are spontaneously growing strange new body parts. Viggo Mortensen's Saul has decided to turn his into an art form, taking part in solemn surgical ceremonies with Caprice (Léa Seydoux), who removes the new growths in front of a rapt audience in underground bunkers.

It's a gloomy, HR Giger-esque world with a certain fascination to it. And of course, there's a sex thing going on here: Kristen Stewart's bureaucrat character loves nothing more than a good poke around Saul's inner organs, and she's not the only one.

There's a more disturbing plot line that had some people walking out of the screenings at this year's Cannes, but it remains an atmospheric entry into the Cronenberg canon that returns to the mood of his earlier films such as *Dead Ringers*, *Crash* and *eXistenZ*. It's the second film called *Crimes of the Future* that he's made: the first was a 1970 sci-fi comedy, which had a different but equally bizarre plot.

These days, Cronenberg is arguably better at more conventional dramas like *Maps to the Stars*, but *Crimes of the Future* still has modest, twisted appeal. *9 SEPTEMBER* **ANNA SMITH**

CULINARY ART

Flux Gourmet
STARRING Asa Butterfield, Gwendoline Christie
DIRECTED BY Peter Strickland
★★★★☆

FOOD, SEX, PERFORMANCE ART and tummy troubles are all on the menu in a bold and brilliant concoction from arthouse director Peter Strickland (*The Duke of Burgundy*). As a former member of The Sonic Catering Band, he presents a convincingly ridiculous fictional culinary performance collective, led by Fatma Mohamed's domineering, sensual Elle di Elle. Her group stage outrageous scenes under the watchful eye of sponsor Jan Stevens (Gwendoline Christie), while flatulent narrator Stones (Makis Papadimitriou) shares the agony of attempting to document their art, while suffering from bowel issues.

It's as bonkers as it sounds but loaded with smart humour, from the observational to the absurd. Performances are fun, from *Sex Education*'s Asa Butterfield as a kinky artist to Richard Bremmer as the unsympathetic, wine-swilling Dr Glock. The tone veers close to body horror in the performance scenes, but it's worth it for the deliciously dark comedy that explores our relationships with art, food and each other – there is heart in here, as well as a running joke about a flanger.

Flux Gourmet won't be for everyone, but if you're a Strickland type then this will be a cult favourite before the credits roll.

30 SEPTEMBER **ANNA SMITH**

Elle di Elle (Fatma Mohamed) holds forth at the culinary collective

Moonage Daydream is a must-see for Bowie fans

BOWIE LIVES!

Moonage Daydream
STARRING David Bowie
DIRECTED BY Brett Morgen
★★★★☆

FANCY DIVING INTO DAVID BOWIE'S MIND for two hours and 20 minutes? *Moonage Daydream* may be as close as you can get. A collage of footage, much of it previously unseen, it's an ode to the great Bowie by Brett Morgen, who spent years poring over the artist's archives to assemble the first film ever sanctioned by the Bowie Estate. The result is a dreamlike experience, with images and interview clips colliding with performance footage and music from 40 exclusively remastered Bowie songs.

There's also an insight into his visual and experimental video art, as well as journals, drawings and photographs selected from over five million items. With its frenetic pace, *Moonage Daydream* may risk sensory overload, but for his fans, it really is a gift. *17 SEPTEMBER* **ANNA SMITH**

25 BEST SUPERHERO MOVIES OF ALL TIME

From origin stories to end games, Caped Crusaders to Spider-Men — our picks of the greatest superhero films to grace the big screen

BY DAVID FEAR, BRIAN HIATT, AND ALAN SEPINWALL

1

Black Panther

2018

Ryan Coogler's tale of T'Challa — part-time Avenger, full-time regent of the fictional African empire known as Wakanda — is more than just the crown jewel of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. It's an old-school epic that combines widescreen thrills with a glorious, gorgeous Afro-futurist aesthetic and genuine moral gravitas. It proved that you could successfully fuse a filmmaker's sensibility into the MCU without compromising the corporate bottom line; and it gave us a Shakespearean tragedy in comic-book cosplay, complete with a conflicted hero (rest in peace and power, Chadwick Boseman) and a multilayered villain (Michael B. Jordan's Erik Killmonger). Most of all, it proved that superhero movies could be about something more than just entertainment — they could reflect, refract and represent the real world around us while still transporting us to some other place entirely. They could be more than just a roller-coaster ride. They could, in fact, be cinema. Wakanda forever.

Boseman

Maguire

2 Spider-Man 2

2004

Sam Raimi's original *Spider-Man* was going to feature both the Green Goblin and Doctor Octopus. Instead, he saved Doc Ock for this masterpiece of a sequel, where the filmmaker's ultra-sincere approach to the material was firing on all cylinders — from Spidey's crisis of confidence to Alfred Molina as Peter Parker's tragic, mecha-tentacled foe. The subway train fight (and its aftermath) remains one of the genre's single most satisfying, emotional set pieces to date.

3. Logan

2017

In the 80s, comic-book creators like Frank Miller helped define a mode of adult superhero storytelling, with noir-ish, ultraviolent stories set in something like the real world. James Mangold's magnificent *Logan* managed to bring that same approach into the movies, complete with a gloomy, dystopian, decapitation-packed take on the last days of Hugh Jackman's Wolverine. Nodding to classic Westerns, it depicts a not-altogether-unfamiliar future world where superheroic and American dreams are dying out together. And Patrick Stewart's chilling performance of the world's most powerful mind addled by dementia should have won him award nominations.

4. Avengers: Endgame

2019

If you saw this final chapter to the "Infinity Stones" saga on opening weekend, odds are the audience response to the return of T'Challa, Spider-Man, and every other hero Thanos turned to dust was the loudest you'd ever heard in a cinema. That's the benefit of *Avengers: Endgame* acting as the equivalent of a season finale to a long, enormously entertaining narrative over a decade in the making. It gathers a number of MCU OGs for one last hurrah, and that final battle against Thanos is one chill-inducing story beat after another.

5. Superman

1978

Yes, it was the movie that made you believe a man could fly. Yet the greatest special effect in Richard Donner's big-bang event for the genre simply involves Christopher Reeve removing his glasses, straightening his posture, and letting audiences see how a clumsy, mild-mannered nerd named Clark Kent transforms into the Man of Steel. Such is the magic of Reeve's performance in both halves of the role — not to mention Margot Kidder's pitch-perfect Lois Lane and Gene Hackman's brilliant Lex Luthor. This is the superhero film that started it all.

Reeve

6. Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse

2018

This animated addition to the Spider-Man universe — make that universes, plural — is bursting with colour, imagination, and Spider-Men... and women... and a wall-crawling pig. It's complicated yet never hard to follow, as Afro-Puerto Rican graffiti artist Miles Morales (Shameik Moore) inherits the Spidey mantle. The teen soon meets his peers from across parallel realities, voiced by everyone from Jake Johnson to Hailee Steinfeld to, yes, Nicolas Cage. Together, they must cross their webstrands and save the multiverse. A dazzlingly new take on a very old story.

Bale and Ledger

7 The Dark Knight

2008

"You either die the hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain." The second in Christopher Nolan's game-changing *Batman* trilogy still centres around Christian Bale's brooding Caped Crusader. But it's Heath Ledger's Joker — both funny *and* nightmare-inducing — that truly elevates this into the superhero-movie canon. And scenes like Batman's vertiginous Hong Kong building assault help achieve Nolan's stated goal of beating the Bond franchise.

8. Thor: Ragnarok

2017

Director Taika Waititi pushed the MCU's usual self-deprecating humour to its limit and beyond, unlocking a comedic flair that Chris Hemsworth had never shown in his previous Thor films. It's both a perfect addition to the series' mythical tales of gods and monsters and a general skewering of the pomposity of the entire franchise — not to mention that Mr Waititi was very much getting his money's worth for the rights to Led Zeppelin's 'Immigrant Song'.

Hemsworth

9 Wonder Woman

2017

Gal Gadot radiates benevolence as the title character — an Amazonian princess armed with a lasso of truth and an unbreakable moral compass — in a way that no actor had managed in a superhero movie since Christopher Reeve. And the First World War setting of Patty Jenkins' film helps familiar tropes feel fresh, as does the simple fact that a female superhero was finally getting a great movie of her own. The no-man's-land battle scene, with Wonder Woman's costume practically glowing against the grey backdrop as she deflects bullets and pummels soldiers, is indelible.

Gadot

10. Iron Man

2008

Tony Stark and his customised metallic suit may have been around since the beginning of Marvel's heyday, but outside of the comics, he was a bit of a pop-culture nobody. The only reason he was given his own movie was because Marvel had sold away the rights to Spider-Man and the X-Men. Not to mention that Robert Downey Jr.'s career had seen better days. But the combination of actor and role turned out to be perfect blockbuster alchemy, paving the way for the MCU to establish the dominant movie franchise of modern times. Not to mention the jaw-dropping post-credits appearance of Nick Fury, which suggested we'd only just scratched this cinematic universe's surface.

OPPOSITE PAGE: MATT KENNEDY/MARVEL STUDIOS/EVERETT COLLECTION; THIS PAGE: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) COLUMBIA PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION, CLAY ENOS/WARNER BROS.; MARVEL STUDIOS/EVERETT COLLECTION, WARNER BROS./EVERETT COLLECTION, WARNER BROS./EVERETT COLLECTION

11 The Incredibles

2004

Brad Bird's first Pixar movie is a dual homage to the *Ozzie and Harriet*-style sitcoms of the 50s and the sleek, cool spy movies of the 60s — not to mention that it's a great addition to superhero toons, with its sly, funny riff on a Fantastic Four-style group as a near-dysfunctional nuclear family. The retro look and primo action sequences add to the fun, but it's the voice work — Holly Hunter and Craig T. Nelson as Ma and Pa Incredible; Samuel L. Jackson as fellow crime fighter Frozone ("Honey! Where's my supersuit!?!"); Bird himself as the Anna Wintour avatar/world's greatest costume designer Edna Mode; and Jason Lee as a megalomaniacal super-villain nursing a long-held grudge — that really makes this shine.

Lawrence

12. Spider-Man: Homecoming

2017

Tom Holland's cameo as your friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) suggested he'd bring something fresh to the Marvel icon; his first solo joint as the web-slinger confirmed it. This next-gen Spidey updates the character for the MCU-crossover age, solidifying the Sony-Disney deal that allowed him to become a major part of the MCU while channelling the Peter Parker from Stan Lee's origin run — all teen angst and great-responsibility hand-wringing. Throw in a father-figure Iron Man and Michael Keaton's menacing, mecha-Vulture, and you have one truly amazing superhero movie.

13. X-Men: Days of Future Past

2014

Fox's X-Men franchise did its universe-spanning, time-travelling version of *Infinity War*/*Endgame* well before the MCU, and *Days of Future Past*'s wild ambitions pay off with an epic that feels as much like a massive comic-book crossover series as any movie ever made. The film manages to effectively jam together the original and youthful-reboot versions of the X-universe characters, and even pulls off a gambit to push Mystique, played by then-wildly-in-demand Jennifer Lawrence, to the centre of the story without feeling contrived.

14. Spider-Man

2002

The web-swinging scenes alone — which showed how CGI could finally let filmmakers replicate comic-book visuals onscreen for real, opening the door to an entire era — would earn this classic its spot. But even more important, Sam Raimi understood the soap-operatic core of Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's creation, digging in hard on the film's central love story between Peter Parker (Tobey Maguire) and literal girl-next-door Mary Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst). In the process, he gave the world an upside-down kiss that will live forever.

15 Guardians of the Galaxy

2014

Who'd have guessed a hodgepodge group of supporting characters who sprouted from an obscure decades-old sci-fi comic would become a saving grace of the Marvel universe? James Gunn brought goofy, giddy fun to this story of interstellar outlaws whizzing across the cosmos, led by Chris Pratt's rakish thief Peter Quill and featuring the snarkiest raccoon ever to wield a blaster. It's a blast, from the vintage AM radio soundtrack to banter between Pratt and a green-hued Zoe Saldana. We are all Groot.

(FROM TOP): PIXAR; 20TH CENTURY FOX/EVERETT COLLECTION; MARVEL STUDIOS/EVERETT COLLECTION

16. Avengers: Infinity War

2018

Critics exasperated with the MCU's dominance tend to overlook the uniqueness of its intertwined storytelling — by 2018 it was already the most elaborate shared universe in cinematic history. Yet all those hints of things to come pay off handsomely with this first part of the Russo brothers' one-two punch, which is full of delightful fan-service pairings (Captain America and Groot, Thor and Star-Lord, Doctor Strange and Spider-Man), humongous action sequences (that battle in Wakanda), and genuine pathos as it becomes clear that Thanos will annihilate millions of people with a snap of his fingers. You get the sense that, for once, the bad guy *is* going to win.

17. X2

2003

The follow-up to 2000's *X-Men* features a genuinely unsettling moment

(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT): WARNER BROS./EVERETT COLLECTION; MARVEL STUDIOS/EVERETT COLLECTION; MARVEL STUDIOS

in which a malevolent *Homo superior* tricks Patrick Stewart's Professor X into hunting down innocents — and that's only one of the many masterful set pieces in this film. From the opening White House assault to the straight-from-the-comics sequence of Hugh Jackman's Wolverine fighting off an armed battalion, this helped set the bar for how to do superhero sequels and potent mutant metaphors (see the "coming out" exchange) just right.

18. Captain America: The Winter Soldier

2014

The first of the *Captain America* sequels distinguished itself by modelling its story after paranoid 70s thrillers like *Three Days of the Condor* (it even cast Robert Redford as a S.H.I.E.L.D. official with some shady ulterior motives) and forcing the patriotic hero to fight against his own government — not to mention a fellow supersoldier straight out of his own past. (Welcome back, Bucky Barnes.) *Winter Soldier* proved that the MCU could fit a far wider style of stories into its big-picture sagas than just your typical good-vs.-evil parables. It also gives more screen time to some major supporting players (Black Widow, Falcon) and features some of the greatest fight scenes — dig that Cap-vs.-goons elevator melee — in any Marvel film, too.

Batman: Mask of the Phantasm

1993

Serious Bat-nerds view *Batman: The Animated Series* as the truest screen adaptation of the character, and this film spin-off makes a seriously strong case for deserving pride of place. It takes the bottomless grief of its Bruce Wayne (voiced by Kevin Conroy) seriously without making his Batman insufferably grim and gritty. It has Mark Hamill — yes, *that* Mark Hamill — earning chilling laughs as the Joker. The era-spanning design of its Gotham City looks gorgeous on the big screen. And the introduction of Dana Delany as a woman from Bruce's past sets up one of the most tragic conclusions to any Bat story.

20. Superman II

1980

Richard Lester's sequel to the original finds our planet's guardian wanting to retire to enjoy the normal life he's earned with Lois Lane. Unfortunately, he decides to call it a day right as three Kryptonian supervillains break out of the Phantom Zone and try to conquer Earth. The Christopher Reeve-Margot Kidder-Gene Hackman core makes it all sing, as does the focus on the relationship between Superman and the woman he loves. Also: kneel before Zod!

Doctor Strange

2016

Meet Stephen Strange, former surgeon turned Master of the Mystic Arts. Benedict Cumberbatch lends just the right amount of wounded pride and tongue-in-cheek humour to the inaugural big-screen adventure of the Sorcerer Supreme, while director Scott Derrickson makes you feel like you're watching those surreal, hallucinogenic Steve Ditko panels from the original comics come to life. That M.C. Escher-style chase scene remains an MCU highlight. And the character was so popular he'd end up becoming the go-to supernatural guest star in virtually every other Marvel movie that came after.

22. RoboCop

1987

Paul Verhoeven's merciless skewering of America's obsession with law and order is one hell of a social satire — but it's also a superhero movie (or maybe a super-antihero movie), and a really great one at that. After Peter Weller's police officer in future-dystopia Detroit is murdered, he's assembled into a cyborg that's marketed as the cutting-edge of crime fighting. Soon, this robotic law officer begins suspecting there's something shady going on with his corporate masters. The violence is so over the top that it plays like a parody of might-makes-right comic-book morality stories, which is part of the point.

23

Deadpool

2016

Moviegoers met Ryan Reynolds' Wade Wilson way back in 2009's *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. Fans thought this early version of the Merc with the Mouth felt too tame, so when director Tim Miller brought the character back for his own stand-alone movie, we got to see a much more violent, way more vulgar version of the cult comic character. Ryan Reynolds inherently got why this wiseass assassin-for-hire was such a fan favourite: he's extremely good at killing people, *and* he never shuts up. It leans into Wade Wilson's obnoxious, snark-heavy bad behaviour and doesn't flinch when it comes to taking the genre into NSFW gross-out comedy territory. The result made those other "edgy" superhero movies feel like Disney cartoons by comparison.

Pfeiffer

24

Batman Returns

1992

Tim Burton's original 1989 *Batman* is the more historically important film, but his aggressively weird sequel — including Danny DeVito as a grotesque mutant Penguin and Christopher Walken as a Trump-ish politician — is ultimately the more memorable movie, in particular thanks to Michelle Pfeiffer's wonderfully perverse purr-formance as Catwoman. It also feels more like a Burton film than its predecessor, from its melancholy tone to the hints of mall-goth kink, and the weird friction between his style and the traditional good-vs-evil comic-book story helps make this stand out as a superior Caped Crusader movie.

25. The Rocketeer

1991

The bulk of the post-*Batman* wave of throwback pulp-hero adaptations (*The Shadow, The Phantom*) were forgettable, but Joe Johnston's tale of a Second World War-era pilot with a jetpack battling gangsters and Nazis is a retro delight. Has there ever been a more photogenic superhero couple than Billy Campbell and Jennifer Connelly? Years later, Johnston would apply a similar gee-whiz tone to 2011's *Captain America: The First Avenger*. But this tribute to the old-fashioned derring-do of 30s serials, that is, the original superhero movies, got there first.

(FROM TOP): 20TH CENTURY FOX/EVERETT COLLECTION, WARNER BROS./EVERETT COLLECTION

The home of diversity

The home of diversity

Taimi

The world's largest LGBTQ+ social and dating app

Download Taimi on App Store and Google Play

RS ROAD TEST

Rolls-Royce Phantom Series II

Less a mode of transport and more an *objet d'art*, the latest iteration of 'the best car in the world' is genuinely exactly that. Although a French Riviera encounter wants for a swimming pool moment...

It's 55 years since The Who's Keith Moon was reputed to have driven a Rolls-Royce into a swimming pool on his 21st birthday, 23rd August 1967, at the Holiday Inn in Flint, Michigan. For reasons that are self-evident, memories of the event are hazy and varied.

Moon told this magazine, in 1972, that on reflection "it might have been a Lincoln Continental", his bandmate Roger Daltry lamented the bill for $50,000 of damages that followed regardless of make and model, while John Entwistle denied any of it ever happened, stating, "He couldn't even drive."

Broadly, it matters not. It's rock'n'roll legend now, further immortalised 30 years later by the 1997 Oasis *Be Here Now* album cover. Like the death of Paul McCartney years ago or the moon landings, maybe it happened, maybe it didn't.

What is certain, in my life and times, is that stood on the terrace of the fabulous Maybourne Riviera hotel in Roquebrune-Cap-

Martin, looking down on Monaco and Monte Carlo, and confronted with the all-new Rolls-Royce Phantom Series II, we are — to misquote Roy Scheider — going to need a bigger pool. In hyper-luxury Extended wheelbase form, the Phantom is almost six metres long, more than two metres wide and almost 1.7 metres tall. That's a hell of a displacement.

Here's the thing, though, such is the epic scale of everything in, on and within this leviathan, the sheer size of the machine confers not only heft but status and presence, too. Size really does matter, and if — as Rolls-Royce often have — you want to lay claim to being "the best car in the world" then you better go big, or go home. And this Phantom menaces, with slim headlights sporting intricate, laser-cut bezel starlights either side of the famed Pantheon Grille, in a way no other car can.

Having been handed the keys to a car in "extrovert" specification — sparkling purple paintwork and all — and pointed in the direction of the *villages-perchés* that dot the mountains behind Nice, it takes just a few miles under those enormous wheels (sister cars sport the most delicious disc wheels that echo cars of the 20s) to realise this is something special, a car of absolutes.

QUICK STATS

POWER
563BHP
TORQUE
663LB/FT
0-60MPH
5.1 SECS
TOP SPEED
155MPH
CO_2
345G/KM
PRICE
£369,020

First, even on broken roads, at a decent pace, there is nigh absolute silence within a cabin so insulated from the outside world it could be vacuum sealed. Decades of work in terms of mechanical refinement has its payback and, coupled with a ride quality that feels more like flight than conventional forward motion, it's a haven far from the madding crowd.

Second, it's not just the quality of what's around you that so impresses, but the sheer detail of thought and execution: a starlight headlining that replicates the night sky, a dashboard that functions as an art gallery, the tactile pleasure of a thin-rimmed steering wheel (just made thicker, but still thin by the standards of others), a column shift gearchange that declutters the cabin but feels gloriously of yesteryear.

And all about is hewn from the finest materials: leathers and wood veneers of varying shades as standard (or silks and more exotic materials should you go bespoke), chrome with smoky reflections ten feet deep, switchgear cast as solid ingots and rugs deep enough to lose a small child. This is a very special way to travel.

To the extent I realise, while lunching atop what used to be a diving board in Nice's old port (as you do) and looking down at half-a-dozen Phantoms lined up kerbside (an unusual sight), this ultimate expression of Rolls-Royce is also — essentially — the ultimate car.

The alternatives aren't other cars, but jets, yachts and moribund football teams, or a third home, in Tuscany. With a pool, obviously. Just in case. **DARREN STYLES**

ROLLS-ROYCE MOTORCARS.COM

TECH

SMART SOLUTIONS FOR MODERN LIVING

WORDS AND EDIT
DECLAN MCGLYNN

NOTHING TO SEE HERE

Is the Phone (1) a true iPhone killer?

Many phones deemed the 'iPhone killer' have come and gone since Apple's iconic handset was launched in 2007. But rarely has a new product come as close as Nothing's Phone (1). With its sleek design, programmable light-up 'glyphs', transparent casing and custom, Android-based OS, it's got the same cool factor that has up to now made the iPhone the most popular on the planet.

Based in London, Nothing say they're here to "make tech fun again", with investors including the inventor of the iPod, Tony Fadell, and co-founder of Twitch, Kevin Lin.

Their Nothing Ear (1) headphones garnered heaps of attention when they launched in 2021, largely for their eye-catching design, and The Phone (1) has the same approach, with a striking, instantly recognisable look.

Spec-wise, it's got dual cameras capable of 4K 60fps filming, is made with 100 per cent recycled aluminium and has a 6.5-inch OLED display with 120Hz refresh rate. Best of all, it's much cheaper than its rivals at £399. Although it's unlikely to have Apple's boots quaking just yet, with 200,000-plus pre-orders, it's one of the most exciting phone launches in years.

NOTHING.TECH

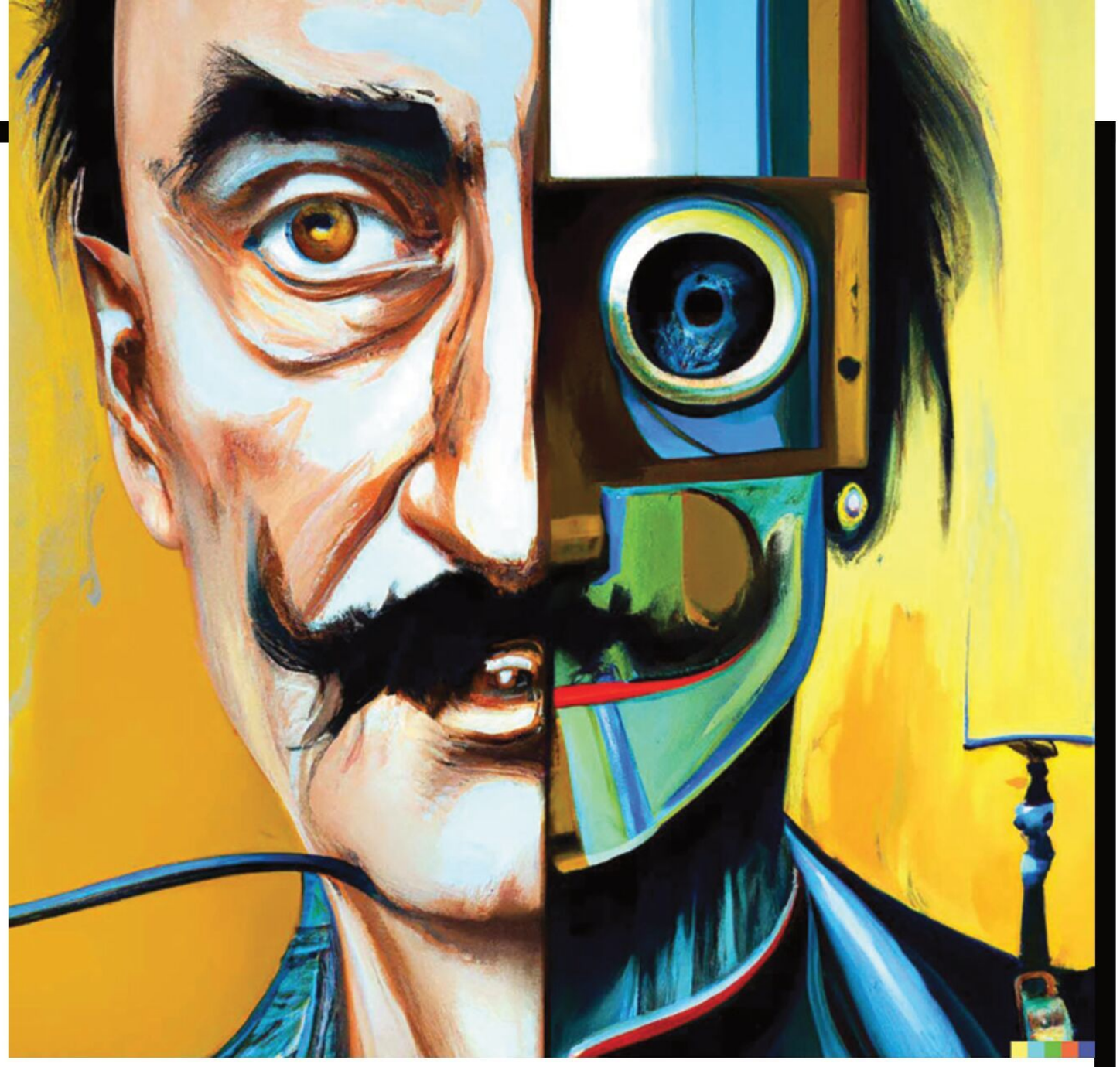
BLUETOOTH AUDIO IS GETTING BETTER

Audiophiles have always had a love-hate relationship with Bluetooth. No one can argue with its convenience, but basic Bluetooth equipment often reduces quality and adds latency, resulting in a less-than-ideal experience for those who expect their music to be flawless.

It's been a long time coming, but Bluetooth LE Audio is here to save the day with the biggest update to Bluetooth audio in years. It offers multi-channel streaming, lower battery consumption, the ability to connect via QR code and higher-quality sound across the board, among many other features. Although some tech will be able to 'update' to this new codec, it's likely many of us won't hear the difference until we buy new hardware that supports it in the months ahead.

BLUETOOTH.COM

DALL·E 2 GOES INTO BETA



OpenAI's DALL·E 2 made a dramatic entrance when it first revealed its prompt-generated AI-powered images earlier this year. Its frighteningly accurate ability to create any thought you can muster up from scratch by simply typing some text made headlines worldwide. It also led many to wonder if AI had finally come of age and was here to take our jobs, our homes and generally fast-forward the impending apocalypse. While we scramble to figure out what it means for humanity, OpenAI has since granted DALL·E 2's magic powers to us mere mortals via a beta that promises to invite one million more people to its servers. They also now allow commercial use of any images generated using the service, meaning you can sell, reprint and merchandise your deepest, darkest thoughts. Or just some funny memes. Join the queue, if you dare.

OPENAI.COM

ROAMING RADIO

Ruark has introduced a new battery pack for their popular DAB radio, the R1. The Back Pack 3 adds extra battery life and better power management to the portable radio that's been a firm favourite since it was first introduced in 2006. The Back Pack clips onto the back of the R1 for a snug fit and can be left in place once fitted as it charges automatically when the unit is connected to mains power. A full charge gives up to 12 hours of playback so you can enjoy a whole day of global radio in the garden, on the beach or on the road. The Back Pack 3 costs £69.

RUARKAUDIO.COM

WORDLE GOES IRL

It might be a few months till Christmas, but it's never too early to start thinking about winning the annual family argument. Viral hit word-guessing game Wordle took the world by storm in early 2022, as players rushed to share their results on social media, with mixed receptions. Now it's arriving IRL with this new physical Wordle game from Hasbro. Players decide on a five-letter word and use the familiar yellow and green tiles to indicate which letters are correct until you guess the word or run out of space. What could go wrong?

WORDLETHEPARTYGAME.COM

STYLE

WHAT WE WANT AND WHAT WE NEED

WORDS AND EDIT
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

If you please

Harry Styles' Pleasing beauty range is on to its third micro-collection and it's inspired by all things summer. The Hot Holiday Collection features 12 nail polishes including shades like Beach Ball (deep ocean blue), Nonna's Sorbet (sunshine yellow), Harry's Chair (seaweed green) and Wet Bottoms (clear). There's also Everybody Oil, a hydrating body treatment infused with Roman chamomile and evening primrose oils, which will replenish your skin and give it a healthy glow, while the Pleasing Spritz – containing hyaluronic acid, niacinamide and microalgae – is an instant wake-up tonic for radiance under the sun.
pleasing.com

Graffiti my soul

Alexander McQueen's autumn/winter 2022 collection is looking back to their roots, taking inspiration from the label's early work as well as the late 50s and early 60s. There are nods to iconic Lee McQueen moments, such as spray-paint silhouettes and graffiti, harking back to Shalom Harlow's finale at the spring 1999 show, when her white dress was spray-painted black, green and yellow by robots. Oversized silhouettes are balanced with fitted shapes, including asymmetrical drape detailing and corsetry. The modern McQueen and the classic are both evident, with punches of pink and red, panels of floral lace, sleeveless tailoring, and Fair Isle knits that truly merge the past with the present.
alexandermcqueen.com

A new flame

Boy Smells have created an uber-cool empire of lifestyle products that includes candles, fragrances and underwear. They've even got a candle collab with Kacey Musgraves (aptly named Slow Burn). Fronted by *Hacks*' Megan Stalter and *The Batman*'s Charlie Carver, Marble Fruit is the latest taper to light up their collection. Priced £42, its fragrance is a celebration of summer fruits, including pear and nectarine, with subtle overtones of cedar and sandalwood alongside jasmine, freesia and musk.
boysmells.com

ALEXANDER MCQUEEN: PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEAN RYAN MCDAID; FASHION AND WORDS: JOSEPH KOCHARIAN; MODEL SHAWN GOLOMINGI AT KULT MODELS; HAIR & MAKEUP BY RORO CUENCA

The LV trainer goes green

Louis Vuitton continue their sustainability journey with their iconic LV trainer. Adhering to their ethos of circular creativity, it's made with 90 per cent recycled and bio-sourced materials, with the sole crafted from 94 per cent recycled polyurethane, the main shoe from recycled polyester and corn-based plastic materials, and the laces from recycled plastic. It sports the brand's sustainable development logo, and comes in white with either green, red or black accents. The process of making the trainer might be highly complex, but the result is a clean, simple yet vibrant design.
uk.louisvuitton.com

Chaos theory

Maximalism is key for Palace this autumn/winter, and the skateboard brand have thrown all things achingly cool at their collection. Whatever you want in a print or pattern, they've got it – dogs, cowboy boots, leopards, newspaper headlines – as well as their coveted Palace Tri-Ferg logo. Nostalgia plays its part, too, with referential legend football shirts, greatest hits T-shirts and even some varsity jackets and bowling shirts to take you back in time. It's kitsch, chaotic – and completely captivating.
palaceskateboards.com

Pet project

Pampering your fur baby has been taken to another level with Gucci's new pet collection. Including everything from collars, harnesses and leashes to bag holders and air tag cases, it's made with the same materials and motifs throughout, allowing you to mix and match accessories to rival even Kim Kardashian's pup Sushi and Taylor Swift's Ragdoll Benjamin Button. If you want to spoil your favourite animal even more, Gucci have made-to-order pet couches and feeding bowls that come in Gucci prints (with cloches to cover the bowls). To truly make your pet the proudest in the park, polos, T-shirts, knitwear and coats are also available for your cat and dog, with playful motifs such as strawberries and hearts as well as the interlocking Gucci Gs and the brand's classic monogram. Simply purrfect.
gucci.com

GUCCI: CREATIVE DIRECTOR: ALESSANDRO MICHELE; ART DIRECTOR & PHOTOGRAPHER: MAX SIEDENTOPF

Holding court

Levi's have paired up with tennis superstar Naomi Osaka to create five new denim pieces based on sketches by the four-time Grand Slam champion. Featuring patchwork denim, ruffles and Naomi's signature 'flower bear' logo, the collection includes a mermaid skirt, halterneck top, cropped jacket and oversized shirt. The final piece, the '93 Naomi Jean, has a slouchy fit and is based on men's classic 501s. Made from 100 per cent organically-grown cotton, the range is set to be a smash.
levi.com

LUXURY ACCESSORIES

BY
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Make a date

Rolex are experts at reinventing a classic, and they've certainly done that with their Oyster Perpetual Day-Date 40. For the first time, the prestigious Day-Date comes in platinum, rather than its usual 24 ct gold, with an ice-blue dial encased in a fluted bezel (another first), and the signature President bracelet. The new version of the Day-Date is, of course, equipped with plenty of the much-loved, superlative technical features associated with Rolex, including a new-generation movement, calibre 3255, giving even more precision, power reserve, and reliability. This is one timepiece giving new meaning to cool.
rolex.com

FAVOURITE THINGS

Royal Oak Offshore Selfwinding Music Edition watch, £24,600
audemarspiguet.com

Gucci 25H Glass Steel Bracelet watch, £1,250
gucci.com

Montblanc Summit 3 Smartwatch, £1,105
montblanc.com

All the right moves

BY **JOSEPH KOCHARIAN**

Montblanc have always kept pace with a changing world. More than 100 years ago, the brand recognised a major shift as people began to travel more, so it created beautiful and practical accessories for this dynamic new lifestyle: bags for stylish exploring and pens so that travellers could record their adventures as their horizons widened.

Fast-forward to 2022 and Montblanc are still tuned into the zeitgeist. Their *What Moves You Makes You* platform aims to inspire us to live our lives with purpose and passion, and their latest On the Move campaign features Montblanc Mark Maker and actor Cillian Murphy (see page 20).

To meet the demands of today's go-getters, Montblanc's products have duly moved with the times. In the Extreme 3.0 range, the briefcase has been reimagined with an extra-slim document case, while the line's backpack is a sleek, grown-up take on a practical classic. Versality is key, too, and it can be found in the compact Extreme 3.0 chest bag and envelope – these styles are equally at home whether you're climbing a mountain or at a music festival.

Keeping in time with what we need from a watch in the 21st century, Montblanc have introduced the Summit 3 Smartwatch. Compatible with both iOS and Android phones, it features multiple health monitoring sensors and apps, while delivering the eyecatching aesthetic we expect in a Montblanc timepiece.

These finely designed products balance looking forwards while keeping true to the brand's identity and heritage. It's a formula that keeps customers coming back to Montblanc.

Montblanc's On The Move global campaign is now live. Collections featured in the campaign are available at Montblanc boutiques worldwide and online. For more information, visit montblanc.com

1. Montblanc Extreme 3.0 envelope with M LOCK 4810 buckle, £790
2. Montblanc Extreme Summit 3 Smartwatch, POA
3. Montblanc Extreme 3.0 large backpack with 3 compartments, £1,055
4. Montblanc Extreme 3.0 StarWalker black Cosmos pen, POA
5. Montblanc Extreme 3.0 thin document case, £875

Santigold

***The multi-platform art radical and genre-defying vocalist waxes lyrical about the Beastie Boys, clocking a co-sign from Beyoncé on the 'Break My Soul (The Queens Remix)', and celebrating human resilience on new album,* Spirituals**

"I'm thankful to Beyoncé for letting people know about these women who changed the music industry"

***Spirituals* is the first release from your own label, Little Jerk Records. What's the story behind the title?**

Spirituals is a nod to the traditional Negro spirituals. These contained songs that when sung and performed got Black people through the "un-get-through-able". That's what this record did for me. I wrote it in survival mode in LA and produced it in a little studio in the middle of the forest in western Canada during Covid. Social justice protests were unfolding, fires were burning up California, and people were being shot by the police. I had little kids and had to be a mum, wife, human and artist. There wasn't time to feel. It wasn't until I made the space to create that I realised these songs were a lifeline and a way to connect to a higher version of myself and go deeper. I've never written lyrics faster in my life; they were pouring out of me.

In the music video for 'Shake', you get relentlessly blasted by a high-pressure water hose and deliver one of your most daring visual statements yet and a piece of performance art. Where did you draw from?

I was inspired by the images of the civil rights protesters being pounded with high-pressure water hoses by the authorities during peaceful protests. The strength and fortitude it took them – many of whom were young teenagers – to keep going is monumental. So, in the video I try to power through singing this song while enduring the pain they experienced as an homage.

You've toured with Kanye, Jay-Z, M.I.A., Lauryn Hill and jumped on tracks with a staggering list of artists from Devo, to Q-Tip, GZA, N.E.R.D, Basement Jaxx, David Byrne and Julian Casablancas. Was there one in there that hit different from the rest?

I can't pick a favourite because there were so many, especially David Byrne and even Amadou & Mariam. An example of how cool it is to work with the idols you had as a kid was definitely the Beastie Boys for me. I heard 'Cooky Puss' when I was seven years old, and the rest is history. I played that on loop. I tried to get my friends to form an all-girl rap group, but they weren't having it. I was heavily into punk and hip hop. My first time on stage was fronting my own punk rock band, Stiffed. So when I found out the Beastie Boys were fans of my first album and listened to my music, that was so wild. Not long after that, they invited me to play some shows, write lyrics and add vocals for their reggae dub track, 'Don't Play No Game That I Can't Win'.

Where were you when Beyoncé called out your name alongside other queens in the industry on her 'Break My Soul (The Queens Remix)'. What does that mean to you as an artist?

I was here in Jamaica when the remix broke, and my phone started blowing up. I had no idea she mentioned me. I'm honoured to be shouted out among all these Black women – powerful, powerful spirits, many of whom never received the acknowledgement they deserved! I'm thankful to Beyoncé for using her platform to let people know about these important Black women who have been pioneers, who changed the music industry and impacted so many. A lot of people know Grace Jones and Solange, but they might not know me, or Rosetta Tharpe or Bessie Smith, and now they're taking the time to look us up. That means a lot.

Throughout your rapid trajectory, you've been fiercely innovative. Your music has appeared on car commercials with Karen O of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, you sang background vocals for Tyler the Creator's *IGOR* and you've acted on *The Office*. What does the future hold?

I'm really excited to let my music take me to new places. I want to continue branching out into all forms of art. I created *Spirituals* as a multisensory experience. I have a small batch of natural skincare products and a tea collection coming out bearing the same name. I'm writing a book tracing back four generations of phenomenal women in my family in Mississippi as well as my own journey. I'm working on a film. I'm releasing a new podcast series interviewing other artists and brilliant thinkers. Currently, in London, I'm also in a video installation as part of the exhibition, In the Black Fantastic, at the Hayward Gallery.

When I was making *Spirituals*, there was so much that I wanted to express. When you put out a new project, sometimes your message gets condensed to "Santigold is finding her power", but for me, it's so much deeper than that. I'm only getting started. **TRACY KAWALIK**

***SPIRITUALS* IS OUT ON 9 SEPTEMBER**

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